



ANNA MARIA DE SOUZA:
Celebrating a life
BY JOAN HARTING BARHAM

It is wonderfully apt that Anna Maria de Souza's legacy—like the annual party she created—seamlessly blends laughter with largesse. She will always be remembered as a woman whose joie de vivre was inescapable and whose determination, in service to the Brazilian Carnival Ball she founded, was legendary. >



A Real-life Fairy Tale

The story of how Anna Maria de Souza, who succumbed to cancer in September of 2007, launched the country's most glamorous charity ball has all the elements of a classic fairy tale. There is the plucky heroine, the heartfelt wish, the humble beginnings and the ultimate triumph.

It was the winter of 1965 that this lovely young Brazilian abandoned the balmy breezes of her beloved Sao Sebastiao do Paraiso for a new life in Canada. Embracing the adventure wholeheartedly, she was undaunted by landing here in the midst of a record-breaking snowstorm. But as spring approached, her enthusiasm was dampened slightly by the prospect of missing the annual Carnival celebration. "I was so sad that this would be the first time in my life that I didn't dance at Carnival," Anna Maria once recalled. "A friend, a Brazilian priest, gave me permission to use the basement of his church [Santa Ines at Dundas and Grace Streets] and along with a few Brazilian students I knew, we had a party. It was just records, a little food and maybe some beer, but we had a great time."

The next year, at the instigation of Ibis Bengstrom, then the Honorary Brazilian Consul, the party moved to the back of a Spanish restaurant at Sherbourne and Bloor. "The third year, Mrs. Bengstrom said, 'Oh, I have a surprise for you! I have this marvelous place with interior balconies and room for dancing.' So we got



decorations and a pork leg and bread and paper cups," Anna Maria remembered. "It turned out to be the Masonic Hall at Yonge and Davenport. It was rather dusty and dirty, but we'd invited some businessmen, so we had to go through with it. I don't think the fur-clad wives were very impressed—especially after burglars made off with some of the food and coats from upstairs!"

A fourth fête, held in the basement of Yorkdale Plaza, finally drove our heroine to say, "No more!"



But the story doesn't, of course, end there. With encouragement from the head of the newly completed Sutton Place Hotel ("He'd run a hotel in Sao Paulo, so he understood," Anna Maria noted), she reconsidered and mounted a fifth Carnival ball. "It was a really good party, in the Imperial Room, with a well-known Brazilian singer. In fact, I was photographed with this famous singer—I wore a wonderful Gilda-like black satin dress—and when my mother saw the picture in a Brazilian magazine, she was a little surprised!"

In the ensuing years (12 of them at the Four Seasons Hotel), the party gained momentum—even a little notoriety, by "Toronto the Good" standards. "Like the year Sinclair Russell posed live Adonises, wearing little more than body paint and chains, around the ballroom," Anna Maria recounted with a laugh. "It was in the Four Seasons era that, with the help of Howard Gillick and Varig airlines, we began flying in Brazilian dancers and the orchestra. Besides the excitement and fun they added, it became a way to bring authentic Brazilian culture to Toronto," she added.

As the Ball's reputation grew in the '70s, so did the price of admission. Instead of charging a nominal fee to cover costs, enthusiastic attendees who were also Variety – The Children's Charity members instigated the fundraising aspect. At the same time, the tradition of donating a minor portion of the proceeds to Brazil was born—when

money was sent to Goianna, the hometown of then-Consul Alcindo Guanabara.

After three consecutive years with Variety Village as the beneficiary, Anna Maria and the Ball stalwarts came up with the innovative idea of selecting a different charity each year.

("You have to be part diplomat, part businesswoman to negotiate that," she once confessed.) This unique approach means that over the last 41 years the Brazilian Carnival Ball has raised much-needed research and operational funds—an extraordinary \$46 million to date—for most of the city's major charitable institutions and health facilities.

Let Us Not Forget The Handsome Prince

Of course, no fairy tale would be complete without a handsome prince. And Anna Maria's appeared some 27 years ago in the person of Ivan de Souza.

"I was on a fishing trip in Alaska with a group of friends that included Murray and Marvelle Koffler," Ivan recalls. "Marvelle told me that when we got back to Toronto, I had to meet this gorgeous blonde Brazilian woman." Upon his return to the city, he dutifully called and took Anna Maria to dinner. It proved to be a fateful fix-up. "We fell in love that first time we met and were inseparable ever since," he says. Indeed, Anna Maria and Ivan were, as their friends will attest, the beau ideal, the long-married couple always happiest when they could



A LASTING TRIBUTE

The Brazilian Carnival Ball—embodying as it does Anna Maria’s essentially caring nature, her unique ability to imbue generosity with glamour, and her Brazil-accented penchant for fun—shall, and must, go on. So many lives in Canada and Brazil have been eased, and saved, because of Anna Maria de Souza. She will be sorely missed, but the healing effects of her life’s work will live after her.

be together—whether amid throngs at a gala party or over a quiet weekend alone at their country home.

Their idyll came to end with Anna Maria’s passing last fall. “The light has gone out of my life,” says Ivan unabashedly. But his admitted devastation at the loss of his beloved Anna has not curtailed Ivan’s commitment to the Brazilian Carnival Ball in the slightest. In fact, this year he served as its President and CEO—even taking a hiatus from his investment banking business to oversee every aspect of the event. Tellingly, the 2008 Ball benefiting Princess Margaret Hospital, set a tremendous new fundraising record for Canada—and perhaps for all of North America. And with typical thoughtfulness, Anna Maria insisted that this year’s Ball pay special tribute to the oncology nurses. “It was Anna’s express wish to honour these unsung heroes who serve in the front lines of cancer diagnosis and treatment,” Ivan says. “It’s a stressful occupation and the nurses at Princess Margaret have a huge responsibility to care for the psychological, spiritual and cultural needs of cancer patients and their families.”



