

# Creative Juices Flow through Shangri-La Springs

NATURE, ART AND HEALING CENTER LEADER ENCOURAGES PEOPLE TO CLAIM THEIR CREATIVITY

**T**here is something otherworldly and yet down to earth about Zawi Borsa, operations manager of Shangri-La Springs Resort. She serenades birthday guests in a beautiful operatic style. She may, in her hand-customized corduroys, meander through banyan and Mysore fig trees while making up an impromptu acapella or singing one of her originals that seem to come like dreams for a person she's yet to meet that day.

If that sounds like too much of a fairy tale, it is Shangri-La, after all. The 1921 hotel, a historical gem for Bonita Springs, was named after that mystical place where everyone is happy in an earthly paradise of utopia—a fictional imagining of author James Hilton that has become the epitome of the idyllic hideaway.

But Borsa brings it to life in what is now Shangri-La's healing, arts and nature center.

A friend recalls a time with Borsa that indicates she brings the fairy tale along with her wherever she goes.

"One time, we were visiting the Wonder Gardens and she started singing to the talking

bird in the lobby and the bird started singing back!" recalled Jane Portaluppi Durand, an Italian sidewalk chalk artist.

Durand regularly attends the popular monthly Art & Nature Community Night series, where live art is happening in virtually every area of the resort. Guests enjoy watching a potter creating on the wheel, listening to musicians jamming, viewing art pieces of numerous forms being created on-scene and participating in a drum circle. For the abundantly creative, or those looking to fill up their proverbial empty cup, the evening includes Paper Grotto, a live combination of sculpture, video, music and performance art culminating in the making of giant paper installations.

With Borsa at the helm, creative juices certainly flow through Shangri-La Springs, which has historical roots dating back to the early development of Bonita.

Borsa, who serves on the Bonita Springs Historical Society board, sips water from a mason jar, exemplifying her values not only for historical preservation, but also nature preservation.

Shangri-La is now an ever-growing, organic restaurant and spa that was once a relatively small hotel, built in 1921 specifically to accommodate potential buyers for local real estate development of the time.

Even at the outset, the health component of the property was central with mineral springs as a focus for owners with interests in alternative medicine, including homeopathic and osteopathic approaches to wellness.

Just as the property has maintained central themes through its multiple incarnations, so does Borsa.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, she grew up in a creative household, singing along at age 5 with her father playing accordion at family parties. Her mother was a nurse, teacher, cornet player and seamstress. Perhaps that family root explains why, for Borsa, it's not so unusual to purchase a pair of seemingly perfect pants from Chico's and then decide to jazz them up a bit with a strip of lace fabric down the outer seam of each leg.

Long before purchasing those pants, Borsa learned accordion and then clarinet; she sang in musical theater; trained in opera

**ZAWI BORSA, OPERATIONS MANAGER OF SHANGRI-LA SPRINGS, SITS UNDER A MYSORE FIG ON A SWEDISH TRUNK FROM HER GRANDMOTHER. BORSA HAS SEVERAL SELF-PUBLISHED WORKS, INCLUDING A COLLECTION OF 220 HAIKUS WRITTEN IN 220 HOURS, CALLED "440HZ."**



STORY BY JULIE CLAY  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JENNIFER ZIEGELMAIER :: JENNIFERZPHOTOGRAPHY.COM



and developed an insatiable passion for living life with art, almost as if it were breath.

Borsa embodies the elements that make Shangri-La what it is: a healing, nature center for the arts.

“I’m always writing lyrics and poetry,” Borsa shares, “I have thousands of poems. It has helped me to survive life and to deal with life. It’s always a part of me. Just to be creative is self-healing.”

As she sings, impromptu, she then concludes that it’s her greatest wish for everyone to not require a stage or a plan, but to create and express freely in any moment, claiming creativity and sharing it publicly.

Her vast collection of self-published works includes music, books and video. She has a trunk full of journals. That trunk traveled through time from a figure central to Borsa’s life—her grandmother. Eris Carlson, now 93, brought the trunk back from Sweden, a place Borsa yearns to visit to further connect with her Swedish heritage.

Prior to regularly singing her way through the resort’s organic gardens and 80-year-old Mysore trees,



THE BORSA FAMILY: OLIVER 3, IS THE YOUNGEST, TOPPING OFF THE FAMILY OF FOUR SONS WITH HUSBAND GORDON, ZAWI, ORLEY, ODIN AND OAM (OAMORO).

CREDIT: MILA BRIDGER

GETTING HER HANDS DIRTY, ZAWI BORSA REBUILDS A WALL, BRICK BY BRICK, AT SHANGRI-LA SPRINGS AFTER FLOODWATERS FROM HURRICANE IRMA CAUSED A NEAR COLLAPSE.



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Borsa was singing in Chicago subway tunnels.

“The acoustics were amazing!” she recalls, describing how she and a painter friend of the time would feed off each other with her singing a capella and Italian arias.

The crowds enjoyed them so much, their response often moved her to tears when it was over.

Next, at age 22, creative activists led Borsa to the artistic hotbed of Austin, Texas. She was already attuned to

what was needed to bring art and the public together.

“It’s about listening to the community. Artists there were telling me about their frustration with trying to get into galleries.”

Her solution was to open the “non-judgmental” multimedia Movements Gallery, which garnered awards for its unique approach to the arts. Movements housed poetry readings, live music, film, a tea bar, creative dance, visual art, sculpture and installation art.

### History of Paradise

Zawi Borsa serves on the Bonita Springs Historical Society board and, while preserving Shangri-La, she is active in preserving and restoring the homes and neighborhoods that helped to shape the town a hundred years ago. Construction is in full swing to reopen the McSwain Home on Old 41, located less than two blocks from Shangri-La. Built in 1915, the restored home will offer a deck with bench seating along the railing in front, and a venue space in back for events. Borsa’s experience with Shangri-La’s own restoration offers valuable input for the project, Historical Society leaders said.

Support the 2nd Annual Bonita Springs Historical Society fundraiser at Shangri-La, 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m., March 15, featuring guest speaker John Cheatham, the son of a former Shangri-La owner. 239-390-2092 [BonitaSprings-HistoricalSociety.org](http://BonitaSprings-HistoricalSociety.org).

### 33-A Search for Truth

Zawi Borsa’s forthcoming preteen novel series, “33-A Search for Truth,” centers around a medieval, Disney-like setting gone wrong.

She divulges, “As the characters set out on a journey to restore the seemingly perfect life they had, each new experience reveals to them an appreciation for what they had but also a new perspective on life and its values. Creativity, imagination and an open mind are integral to their survival, something that I am hoping the young readers come to accept as truth in their own lives.”

Each book has 33 sections which, once read, will unlock technology to further reveal additional story points. Noted photographer Mila Bridger is one of five contributors. “This series is a celebration of the magical world we live in, bringing those elements to the forefront in a fantastical setting,” says Borsa.

Borsa brings many of those concepts to Shangri-La.

She also brought to Bonita Springs a family of five that she started during her years in New York City, curating art shows in Greenpoint, Brooklyn.

Borsa organized visual artists and musicians from Chicago, Austin and New York to create the “Our Time” project, a two-CD collection with accompanying printed images reflecting their perspective on the tragic day of 9/11. It was also while in New York that she married Gordon Borsa, a musical composer, and they soon started their family, vying for a simpler life in the coastal town of Oaxaca, Mexico.

Her husband taught English while she homeschooled their sons in a world devoid of technology and full of organics.

“We performed in little clubs and the kids would perform too. We offered free art classes,” said Borsa.

The boys got a section of wall to use as art space in their home. “What it does to the mind of a child to tell

them go paint on the walls...it’s great,” she laughs.

Borsa used sewing skills learned from her mother to make clothing for the family as an expression of love, and she followed suit with their neighbors, along with hand-washing and linedrying everything on their rooftop.

“Palm trees dotted the landscape, powerful ocean surf to the south and the Sierra Madre mountains to the north,” Gordon recalled.

Now, the landscape has changed, with Borsa choosing to harness the rare opportunity to remodel Shangri-La with the small group that launched the reconstruction project of 2012.

### If you go

**What:**  
Art & Nature  
Community Night

**When:**  
6 to 9 p.m., every second  
Wednesday of the month

**Where:**  
Shangri-La Springs Resort,  
27750 Old 41 Rd.,  
Bonita Springs

Her husband now enjoys doing more of the homeschooling, though she too spends every minute she can with family. Their four boys are Oliver, 3; Oam (short for Oamoro), 11; Odin, 14; and Orley, 17.

“I know all the playgrounds,” her husband says, smiling.

He’s writing a book of poetry and digital children’s books.

“It’s an experiment. I don’t do poetry. I’m usually writing music. I’ve been a composer for 30 years. I get it from her,” he says, nodding toward Borsa as she sits under the Mysore tree with Oliver, resting on her grandmother’s trunk, filled with poems and overflowing with stories.

“She’s influenced me in this way. When you’re surrounded by people like Zawi... She has opened my mind to different art forms,” he said.

While creative expression may seem to come easily to Zawi, she seeks to create a world where everyone feels as free to express themselves.

“When I think of art and artists, I see everyone in that picture. Some of us have been trained or practiced in a specific skill, some have degrees in the arts and some have been recognized more than others. Some artists paint, some sing, some write, some aim the lights, some provide the venue, some raise the children, some plant the trees, some think the great thoughts. The majority don’t even recognize themselves as artists, but are attracted to it all the same and they create the foundation of support, the audience. We are all artists in some way and to some degree. That is why we have an innate need to see it, feel it, know it, live it and, in the end, we become better for it.”