

Leigh Cort Always

by Nancy White



Leigh and her daughter Sue.



Leigh Cort and her husband Jay Greene lead a life of simple elegance in Ponte Vedra. In their 80s, they are blessed with good health, mental acuity and the means to enjoy life to the fullest. Jay works at a business he loves, and she is the driving force behind the Womens Food Alliance, an organization she founded in 2013 to cultivate and advance networking, education, and collaboration for women in the culinary and hospitality industry in the Northeast Florida/Southeast Georgia region.

Despite her gracious appearance, Leigh's life hasn't entirely been spent sipping mimosas on the veranda. She was, and still is, a hard-working woman.

As a timid child growing up in Northern New Jersey, "I was too shy to even talk, but I could sing," she remembers. Winning the lead in her senior class play gave her a voice, and the confidence to pursue a career as an actress.

One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

A romantic at heart, she found love early on with Ben Serebin, a man ten years her senior. They married and made a home in Manhattan, and soon welcomed two children, Jeff and Susan. When Ben passed away unexpectedly, a devastated Cort found an anchor in caring for her children, just six and seven years old at the time.

"In the 70s, life in the theater was all sex, drugs, and rock and

roll, but I didn't do that. I lived in Fort Lee, New Jersey so I could give my children a normal life. I gave up my career, everything that I was building."

She took a job in an ad agency. Three years later she fell for dashing pianist George Cort, then the band leader at the Waldorf. When George suggested they should rent a house together away from the city, Cort found a charming old farmhouse in rural New Jersey.

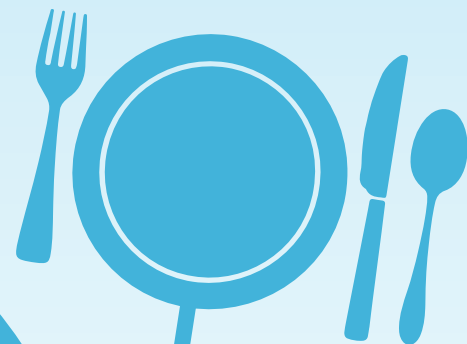
On moving day, however, George was nowhere to be found. A year later he returned, their relationship resumed, and Cort kept singing.

Marriage and a stint performing in the Catskills was followed by a gig in Miami Beach, where she appeared in a movie and was cast in commercials, and George's band played the Fontainebleau. When the Cloisters offered her a singing gig and George the position of musical director in 1980, they moved to Sea Island. Life was beautiful, until George chose a career change and returned to New York, alone. Cort closed that chapter of her life and moved her family back to New Jersey.

Right Place, Right Time

Love wasn't through with her, however. At a family funeral she met Jay Greene, whose mother and hers were first cousins. A few years later she and Jay were married, a happy, loving union that has lasted over forty years.

s Has Great Taste



Members of the Women's Food Alliance enjoyed a "Havana Nights-themed" dinner event hosted by Paladar Cuban Eatery in St. Augustine.



Back in New York, Leigh's career began to blossom. A job with a party rental company led Leigh to Dino De Laurentiis, who had just opened a restaurant in Trump Tower. De Laurentiis introduced her to the Trump team, and she became their party director, producing galas for the rich and famous.

After Trump Tower, she operated as "The Party DoctoRx" advising people how to elevate their home gatherings. She wowed the theater crowd at Sardi's with her party planning expertise. "Of all the roles I ever played, my favorite was being a businesswoman in New York City. I was good at it!" she reminisces.

She joined the Round Table for Women in Food Service, an organization of one hundred dynamic women. There was Faith Stewart-Gordon, owner of the Russian Tea Room; Lidia Bastianich; Sheila Lukins and Julee Rosso of The Silver Palate. These legends taught her that strong women help each other, and decades later when would imagine her next act, she knew it would involve working with women.

A job with the Ritz-Carlton, Amelia Island lured her back to the south, where she and Jay leaned in to the good life on the First Coast. Cort launched a public relations company for a list of hospitality industry clients for several years, until the pandemic pressed pause on the travel industry as a whole.

Heartbreak And Healing

When her son Jeff was diagnosed with cancer, her world was shaken

to the core. She spent as much time with him as she could for the next two years. In-between visits there were frequent, tearful phone calls. One night he told her "Mother, you have to stop crying. Do something. Start a business. Get some girlfriends."

"I remember it like it was last night" she says wistfully.

"So one night in 2013 I sat at my computer and wrote the mission statement for something I thought was going to keep me busy and get some girlfriends. The following morning I called Jeff and said, you're going to be really proud of me."

It's a comfort to Cort that her son knew before he passed that the organization he inspired her to create, the Womens Food Alliance was growing and thriving.

She enjoys a close, loving relationship with her daughter Sue, who moved here with her husband Dave a few years ago. Sue is also Vice President of the Womens Food Alliance. "If I left the Earth tomorrow, this is the legacy I leave her," Leigh says.

Today the Womens Food Alliance is a passionate, supportive network of women shaping the food and hospitality scene. Cort deftly deflects credit and praise to the members of the organization, who she truly counts as her friends. "I just did it to have something to do, to have some girlfriends" she says. "I never thought it would be so successful."

Womensfoodalliance.com, the WFA website celebrates them, and features a tribute to her son Jeff. ☎