

INDIAN RIVER  
**Press Journal**  
SCRIPPS TREASURE COAST NEWSPAPERS

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## Freed from abusive past, Stephanie Haridopolos feels lucky

■ Wife of Senate president shares story of domestic violence

By Michelle Spitzer  
Florida Today

BREVARD COUNTY — Dr. Stephanie Haridopolos walks out of a local barbecue restaurant after a quick lunch, and all eyes are on her.

Even those who don't know her as a successful family physician or the wife of the president of the Florida Senate can't help but look her way. The 39-year-old easily captivates attention with

her pint-size frame in 4-inch heels, golden blond hair and perfectly applied makeup. Her confident but approachable aura entices even strangers to say hello.

It's the same trait that easily allows her to switch gears from handing out coats to homeless veterans during winter months to entertaining the governor at her Merritt Island home for a dinner party or hosting swanky fundrais-

ing events for a list of who's who in the political world.

"I do feel like I'm the luckiest woman in the world," Haridopolos says.

It's a statement she wouldn't have made a decade or so ago, while she was struggling to put herself through medical school and residency, raise two small children and escape domestic violence.

See STEPHANIE, 5A



FLORIDA TODAY

Alexis, (from left) Mike, Reagan, Stephanie and Hayden Haridopolos pose for a photograph.

## LOCAL

### STEPHANIE from 1A

For the first time, Haridopolos is publicly sharing the story of the years before she married Florida Senate President Mike Haridopolos, whose district includes a large part of Indian River County, as well as part of north-central St. Lucie County and large parts of Brevard and Osceola counties.

"And I'm proud to be a survivor because I didn't have a perfect life, but I achieved my goals," she says. "I hope my story can inspire and help someone else."

Then Stephanie Bressan, she was living in London completing a two-year elective rotation for medical school when she met and fell in love with a local. They married and soon had a daughter.

"That was a dark time," she says. "We had no money. I would just eat beans and toast. I felt so alone. I had no support around me, no family, no friends."

And she says the abuse, physical and verbal, had begun. It continued when the couple, along with their small daughter, moved to Albany, N.Y., so she could complete her residency at Albany Medical Center. A

son soon joined the family.

She says her husband was careful in where he struck her, always in places she could cover with clothing so no one would see.

"He would tell me I'm ugly and I'm stupid," Haridopolos says, her voice lowering. "I believed him. I thought no one else would want me."

Toward the end of her residency, she was coming up with a plan.

"I knew education was my way out, my ticket to success," she says. "How else would I have broken the cycle?"

She landed a job in Brevard County as a family practitioner. Once she started making enough money to take care of herself and her children, she would get a divorce.

The biggest incentive for her: She didn't want her children growing up in an abusive home.

"Once I was able to have enough money for child care and be on my own two feet, I broke away."

Haridopolos' former husband could not be reached for comment.

Although this may have been the hardest obstacle of her life, it was by far not the first.

Her parents divorced, and she moved to South

Florida with her mother when she was 7. The family lived in an apartment on a tight budget. She knew if she was going to be the first person in her family to go to college, the local private high school would be her ticket in. Her parents scraped together enough money to make it happen.

From there, she went to Stetson University in DeLand, where she was a biology major. Freshman year she couldn't help but notice a "cute junior" who seemed to be the most popular guy on campus — Mike Haridopolos.

"He paid no attention to me," she says. "I was a geek who lived in the chemistry lab."

Fast forward to when she's establishing her practice in Brevard, believing in herself and gaining back some confidence.

One day in spring 2003, she was driving around and saw a man standing on a street corner waving a sign trying to drum up support for his run in a special election for a Senate seat. It was Mike Haridopolos.

"I thought, who else has that name besides that cute guy from college," she says.

She didn't stop and didn't give it much more thought. That is, until an 80-year-old patient started

talking politics with her and mentioned the man who had just won the Senate seat.

Dr. Bressan, as she was known at the time, told her patient they went to college together but hadn't spoken since, and her sweet patient became matchmaker.

Their first date, roughly five months after her marriage ended, was at Islands Fish Grill in Indialantic. He remembers she wore a blue dress. She remembers they stood in the parking lot after dinner talking for what felt like three hours.

"I didn't feel like I was good enough for him," she says. "I felt so stained. I couldn't believe he wanted to be with me."

After about a year and a half of dating, Mike took Stephanie back to Islands Fish Grill. In the parking lot, where they'd spent hours talking the night of their first date, he pulled out a ring and proposed.

He now considers her children his own, and they've added a third to the family.

Both say they found the perfect partner.

"When I get confronted with medical issues in politics, I'm the luckiest guy going," Mike Haridopolos says. "She gives not only the doctor answer but

the patient answer and the mom answer. She also can educate other senators. We ask her questions — what does something mean, how does it work — and she answers everything."

His wife is a key component in changing Florida's reputation as the nation's pill-mill capital for addictive painkillers such as oxycodone. Both the senator and the doctor worked hard to get a law passed this year that gives law enforcement officials and the state tools needed to crack down more aggressively on pill mills.

One facet of the law, which took effect in July, bars Florida doctors from dispensing narcotics and addictive medicines at most offices or clinics.

The measure also created a prescription drug database that allows pharmacists to pull up information on how often a patient is prescribed and sold these drugs.

"In my practice, I've seen an increase in the number of families destroyed by narcotics," Stephanie Haridopolos says. "My husband is the first (Florida) Senate president married to a physician. I'm taking this seriously. I feel like I have a megaphone. I'm not going to sit on the back burner."