A Legacy of Learning
INSPRIED BY THE FRANKLIN INSTITUTE’S MISSION TO SERVE UNDERPRIVILEGED YOUTH, NICHOLAS AND ATHENA KARABOTS MADE MUSEUM HISTORY WITH A DONATION TO MAKE A NEW PERMANENT EXHIBITION, “YOUR BRAIN,” A REALITY. BY MARNI PRICHARD MANKO

When philanthropist and local business tycoon Nicholas Karabots first walked through The Franklin Institute’s brand-new and spectacularly innovative “Your Brain” exhibit, his first reaction was that of sheer surprise. “I had no idea what went on in this little head of mine,” he says with a laugh. “Especially when I see my lovely wife. Now I know exactly what neurons are firing when I look at her.” Science aside, his involvement with The Franklin Institute is also a connection of both the head and the heart.

Four years ago, when Nicholas—the son of poor Greek immigrants—first ventured into The Franklin Institute, he encountered a group of inner-city kids enthralled with the stars, skies, and astronomy. Nicholas, a self-professed “bad kid” growing up, was instantly taken back to his rough-and-tumble childhood in the South Bronx and his trips to New York’s Hayden Planetarium. “The Hayden Planetarium opened my eyes to certain things—and The Franklin Institute brought me back to my youth,” he says. “My wife and I just fell in love with the programs here.”

It’s a connection so strong that it spurred him, along with wife Athena, to donate $10 million to the Philadelphia institution—the single-largest private sector donation in its storied 180-year history. The end result of this investment? The Nicholas and Athena Karabots Pavilion, a game-changing, high-tech, 53,000-square-foot addition.

“This expansion will take us far into the future,” says Larry Dubinski, the institute’s chief operating officer, who will take over as CEO and president on July 1. “It is a building that will work and flow with wherever the future takes us. But none of this would have happened if it were not for Mr. and Mrs. Karabots,” he says emphatically. “The Karabotses have made one of the most marked impacts on the Franklin Institute in our entire history.”

The Karabotses aren’t new to the philanthropic game. Nicholas made his fortune continued on page 64
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as the head of the Fort Washington–based Kappa Media Group, best known as the world’s leading publisher of puzzle magazines. He also serves as chairman of the board of the Spartan Organization and the Jericho National Golf Club, and he and Athena are the owners of the local 24-acre Karamoor Farm winery. And to share in their good fortune, they have been some of the region’s most-active charitable donors, offering major gifts to The Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, The College of Physicians of Philadelphia, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

For the charitable couple, The Franklin Institute falls squarely into that pantheon of worthwhile organizations. “The Franklin Institute has never, ever done anything that wasn’t spectacular,” explains Athena. “We have always respected the Institute, and that’s why we are involved.”

Anchored by three key elements, the $41 million pavilion is nothing short of spectacular. The centerpiece is the signature “Your Brain” exhibition, an awe-inspiring, 8,500-square-foot exhibit with more than 70 different interactive elements that’s been eight years in the making. “I think we all want to learn more about how our brain works, and from beginning to end, this exhibition will take people into their own brain and transform them,” says Dubinski, adding that this is the largest exhibition on the brain in the country. Included in the exhibit is a climbable 18-foot brain structure that mimics neurons firing, an elevated piano that illustrates the notion of fear, and a street scene full of mind-bending optics. By all accounts, “Your Brain” is poised to be the next generation’s version of the Institute’s beloved “Giant Heart,” a fixture here since 1953.

Equally awe-inspiring is the 3,000-square-foot kinetic Shimmer Wall that welcomes visitors as they enter Karabots Pavilion. Created by world-renowned environmental artist Ned Kahn and crafted out of 10,000 aluminum tiles, the nature-controlled Shimmer Wall was designed to mimic the sky and move freely in the wind. The lingering impression is that of undulating waves. “It’s absolutely magnificent—you feel as if you’re floating,” says Nicholas. The pavilion also houses an IACC-certified Conference Center and an 8,000-square-foot, climate-controlled traveling exhibit space, which will allow the Institute to bring larger, world-class visiting exhibitions into its hallowed halls.

But for the Karabotses, it’s the new high-tech and innovative STEM Education Center for student-based programs that turns their involvement from merely philanthropic into something deeply personal. “We’re hoping to work on some educational programs with the kids, with the ultimate purpose of drawing some of these kids from the disadvantaged areas and helping them learn a roadway out of negativity,” Nicholas says.

“The satisfaction will be when kids come through the Institute and the new ‘Your Brain’ exhibit, their eyes are opened a little bit further, [and they] want to learn a little bit more,” says Nicholas. “The ultimate purpose is to show kids that there is something out there that they haven’t discovered yet. To me, that would be the ultimate success. That is the only legacy I care to leave.” The Franklin Institute, 222 N. 20th St., 215-448-1200; fi.edu PS