

Making Daring Decisions



Scenes from the Guatemala school, where students and teachers benefit from Adrienne Rosen's good deeds

Photos by Adrienne Rosen

Adrienne Rosen has ridden a motorcycle around the world, plays hockey and leads a non-traditional family. More importantly, she is passionate about *Tikkun Olam*, which led her to help children in Guatemala receive access to an education *By Nicole Kallmeyer*

Lying by the pool in a Cuban resort while on vacation with her family, Adrienne Rosen received some interesting news: A delegation of Iranian men had just arrived in the hotel lobby. Spurred by curiosity, Rosen marched inside to inquire about the suited strangers. Upon erroneously learning that the president was among the Middle Eastern males, Rosen, holding her poolside cocktail and clad in a bathing suit, starting jumping up and down and screaming: "Leave Israel alone! Stop the anti-Semitism!" In no time, she was pounced on by hotel security.

Slightly shaken, Rosen began to walk away when several men in the circle beckoned her to their leader. "What do you want to say to me?" he said. "Glad you asked," Rosen casually replied. She then gave a speech about dialogue, not violence, being the only means of achieving peace with Israel. The male, Muslim leader shook hands with the female, Jewish lesbian and they parted ways.

This encounter is only one of many unusual, unbelievable experiences in Rosen's life. The mother of two has been described as a force of nature, never afraid to speak her mind and make daring decisions. At age 15, when other girls were choosing nail polish, she was choosing a religion. At age 30, when other women were settling into careers and buying cars, she quit her job and decided to motorcycle around the world. Now in her fifties, while other mothers keep fit with Pilates or yoga, Rosen is the goalie for a men's hockey team.

"She's got an amazing amount of energy and ideas just come flying out her mouth every two seconds," says Myra White, Rosen's wife and partner of 23 years.

Rosen's energy is palpable on a recent Wednesday evening in Toronto's Lula Lounge. She is the woman of the moment, dressed in a fitted black dress and shiny new



stilettoes – "I bought these \$300 pair of shoes that are much less comfortable than my hockey skates!"

About 300 people have gathered to support Rosen's nascent charity, Access Education Guatemala Children's Fund, which will send Guatemalan children to school. As everyone sits to enjoy vibrant Latin food and music, Rosen stands to declare her appreciation, in Spanish and English, and explains why she started the organization.

Finding a remedy

After several failed artificial insemination attempts in her late thirties, Rosen decided to adopt a child. At that time, same-sex couples had little chance of adopting in Canada, so Rosen and White set their sights on Guatemala, which has the world's highest per capita adoption rate. Affirming Murphy's Law, Rosen fell pregnant right before she went to the Central American country to pick up her 8-month-old daughter, who they named Alana.

As Alana grew into a teenager she began acting out quite severely, Rosen explains. Although Alana denied it, Rosen knew she was struggling with the primordial question. At the time, Alana claimed she was uninterested in revisiting her past, but Rosen had a hunch that finding her daughter's birth mother could be the key to remedy her growing pains. "We have to know where we're from in order to go forward," Rosen says.

Rosen packed her bags and landed in Guatemala City. The next day she spent four

hours driving to the birth mother's suspected town, and another four hours knocking on doors to pin down her exact location. When Rosen finally found Alana's biological mother, the Guatemalan woman denied that she had given up her child. But Rosen was persistent, arriving on her doorstep again the next day with more documentation and proof. "I said listen, if you're my daughter's family, you're my family," Rosen recalls, and sure enough, the woman owned up.

When Rosen returned to Canada with pictures and video footage, Alana had only one question: "When do we leave?" Rosen told her daughter she could go as soon as she learned 100 Spanish words.

In Guatemala, Alana faced her birth mother and asked why she had been given away. She learned that she was a twin and weighed only three pounds when born. Had Alana not been adopted, she would have died due to her mother's lack of breast milk. Rosen's instincts were right on target; Alana obtained the answers she needed to move forward with peace of mind.

During that visit Rosen also met the principal of the village school, and was shocked to learn that only one in seven local children is educated because most cannot afford the \$75 for books and uniforms. "I vowed that other people like my daughter would go to school and become literate," Rosen says. She got back to Canada and set the wheels in motion, calling friends and forming a board of directors. "Our mission is to put every child in school, starting with one community and then moving on to the next until we move through Guatemala."

Converting to Judaism

Rosen links her commitment to this charity to the Jewish concept of *Tikkun Olam*, the



call to repair the world. “I just wish that every Jew would take as seriously as Adrienne does,” says Elyse Goldstein, Rosen’s close friend and the rabbi who converted and married her.

Rosen began living as a Jew from the age of 15. Born to working class, a-religious parents in Scarborough, Rosen sought a source of direction after sliding into drugs and rebellion. She gravitated towards a Jewish teacher and starting following her to Holy Blossom Temple on Friday nights. “I thought the Kiddush was just bloody marvelous,” she says. “The first time I went I actually burst into tears.”

About a decade later, Rosen took her dip in the mikvah and emerged a Jew by religious law. She became a devoted member of the Narayever congregation because it is fully egalitarian. “I was like a born-again Jew, shuckling with the rest of them and we all wore talisim,” she recalls. But when she and her partner



wanted a Kiddush for their 17th anniversary, some congregants started turning against her. “I just felt really witch-hunted,” she says, “so I ended up leaving.” Ironically, the Narayever years later approved gay marriage.

After that hurtful incident, Rosen became less “hardcore” and decided to stick to basic traditions: Shabbat, chagim, bat mitzvahs, etc. “In many ways Adrienne is a symbol and a template of the downtown, committed, active, passionate Jew raising a stalwartly Jewish family,” Rabbi Goldstein suggests. “She represents a kind of Jew that the mainstream Jewish community doesn’t really know a lot about.”

Rosen might not fit traditional molds, but it is evident she is much loved and respected within a wide circle of friends with various backgrounds and affiliations. Sitting at the Miles Nadal Jewish Community Centre one afternoon, she repeatedly stalls conversation to greet people, from a bespectacled man with a kippah, to the Latina woman cleaning the windows. After an exchange of Spanish pleas-

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With the help of Adrienne’s Access Education Guatemala Children’s Fund, hundreds of children in the small Central American country receive books and uniforms to attend school

antries with the lady – “Mi familia es perfecto, y tu familia?” – Rosen makes a confession: “See, I like the people who work here better than...” she cuts herself off, but the message is clear.

Rosen says her overseas adventures have steered her social preference to people with less material possessions. “I feel most chilled out, most comfortable when I’m sitting with poor people, in Guatemala, chatting,” she says. “I really like the spirit of the poor, because they still have one.”

Rosen first witnessed abject poverty while motorcycling through Latin America. Back in 1983, Rosen wasn’t getting along with her business partner. “I said to her, I’d rather ride a motorcycle around the world than put up with you for another day.” She turned the threat into reality.

In no time Rosen was attending cycle conventions across the country, scoring sponsorship from Yamaha, Canon and American Airlines, and securing media coverage from *The Toronto Star* and 680 News. Before leaving, she took care of the last minor detail: obtaining her motorcycle license.

“So I took off, and I remember just going down the highway, the last reporter was on an overpass taking a picture,” she reminisces. “I remember thinking: wow, this is really wacked, I’m really scared.”

Rosen started in Dallas and moved through Latin America. She then flew with the bike to Europe and rode to Morocco and Israel, where she worked on a kibbutz for three months. Next was India, and then Japan, the last stop before flying back to Canada.

“I remember crying every day, for a long time, and my face being very, very dirty,” she says of the trip’s first leg. “And then I just really got into the role of it and got to meet people that [most North Americans] just never have the chance to meet.”

Rehashing her adventures, Rosen speaks nonchalantly of almost dying in Peru, where she ran out of food and water for 10 days; sleeping with her motorcycle chained to her ankle in fear of it being stolen by bandits; and stealing gasoline in Nicaragua, where a full scale war was underway – “There were machine guns everywhere!”

Despite the trip’s innumerable challenges, perhaps the hardest part was coming home. “Oh my G-d I was so depressed,” she confesses. “Not only was I home, but I had no job and no education.”

Rosen quickly jumped those hurdles. She says her ex-partner had “run the business into

the ground,” while she was gone, so Rosen reconnected with former clients and revamped the company. She and her wife now run First International Courier Systems, which ships, primarily, medical equipment and pharmaceutical products around the world.

Rosen, a high school drop-out, also revived her academic life and completed her Bachelor of Arts in philosophy at York University. She didn’t stop there. While pregnant with her youngest daughter, Sally, Rosen took on a master’s degree in philosophy of education at the University of Toronto’s Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Currently she is working on a PhD on multiculturalism and the funding of faith-based schools through the University of South Africa.

As the mother of a darker-skinned child, Rosen has deeply considered the meaning of multiculturalism and how it plays out in Canadian society. “The constitution is clear about tolerance, but there really isn’t a lot of tolerance here,” she opines, adding that we live in a “very racist society,” which she has witnessed first-hand through Alana’s frequent brushes with discrimination.

Rosen also becomes visibly fired up when discussing some of the behaviour of insular religious or ethnic communities in Canada. In 2007 she tried to attend the funeral of 16-year-old Aqsa Parvez, who was strangled by her own father after refusing to wear a hijab. “This is in my country?” Rosen bewilderedly asks. “We do a very poor job of getting the word out that in Canada, commitment to multiculturalism means that everybody has the right to an active choice,” she says. “Not just some sort of choice on paper.”

Rosen attributes her “gene of social justice” to her mother, Jane, who passed away in 1998. “She was a real fighter and she passed that on and that’s what I’m hopefully passing on to my girls.”

Swept up by the hippy movement, Rosen left home at the age of 17, hitchhiked across the country and found refuge in a Vancouver women’s centre. From a teenager on the run, she has matured into a firmly rooted mother and spouse, passionately committed to family, friends and the mission of *Tikkun Olam*.

“I always say, if you want something done, call Adrienne,” says close friend Ellen Greenblatt. “She’s always looking for a solution.”

Even Iranian diplomats would agree with that.

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