

My 40th Anniversary Story...

March 2009 marks 40 years since I came to the United States. My father, pregnant mother, younger brother and I were amongst the last Jews to leave Poland in 1968. Our journey here was paid for by NYANA, a UJA organization, and we came to the U.S. under "political refugee" status because of a sudden resurgence of anti-Semitism that erupted in Poland. We had no relatives in America and only \$360.

I do remember my first days here, including our first trip to the supermarket where we bought English muffins and could not understand why Americans liked to eat raw bread! We stayed in the Embassy hotel on 71st Street and Broadway for about a month, and I enjoyed spending our first spring days playing in Central Park. I learned my first words in English from the kids in the park - they were "thank you" and "shut up!"

My father, who was always an entrepreneur in Poland, found some very generous people at the 72nd Street synagogue (he spoke Yiddish, but no English) who lent him money to buy a candy store in the Bronx. Now that I think of it, maybe this is where my networking skills come from! We rented an apartment in the building above the store and this is where I lived until I left for Barnard in 1981.

The Bronx was an interesting place to grow up in the 70's. My neighborhood had one of the highest arson rates in the country, and there were frequently people doing drugs in the staircases of our building. For some reason, I don't remember being scared. I think knowing that my parents were always close by gave me the illusion of safety. I also think this is where I learned to "read people" and figure out the best way to deal with them, which I concluded was with respect, no matter what their life situation.

I was very lucky to receive a great education in the Bronx public schools. The teachers I had in grade school were committed to having all 35 kids in their class learn. At Bronx High School of Science, I encountered the smartest people I have ever met in my life! Being surrounded by brilliant kids, all I wanted was to be smart, which meant going to MIT and having near perfect SAT scores. Unfortunately, neither math nor sciences were my strengths, but I managed to do well enough to get into Barnard College.

My parents wanted me to have an "easier" life than they did, which for them meant becoming a professional who worked for a well-established institution. I always knew I had to own my own business. For me, being an entrepreneur would allow me to create opportunities that otherwise would not exist. I also believed that building a business from scratch would test my full potential and creativity. Deep down inside I knew that if I created what clients needed, I would be well rewarded. This to me was what living the American dream was all about. For the past 13 years, I have lived this dream every day!

I share the details of my story with you because during these very challenging times we need to remind ourselves how lucky we are to live in this wonderful country. I also think we need to find the courage inside of us that our relatives had when they first came here. Yes, I am really scared and hope the economy will improve before my and my husband's businesses are deeply hurt. But when I think of my parents coming here at the age of 33 with no language skills or resources, I try to find the strength and hopefulness inside of myself that they must have had 40 years ago.

I believe that the reason America is, and will continue to be, the greatest country in the world is because of the optimism, creativity and courage that all the different people and cultures whose ancestors were brave enough to leave their homes brought with them. I believe that each of us has this courageous spirit within us. I have no desire to run for public office, but do believe that we will persevere and rebuild our great country, and that each of us can make a significant contribution.

I ask you to please help me celebrate my 40 amazing years in this country by "stepping out of your comfort zone" and doing something that requires you to use your creativity and courage. This could be signing up to run a marathon; calling a client to see how you can be of help; writing an article; auditioning for a theatre group; or whatever you have been dreaming of, but talked yourself out of doing. I would love to hear about "your act of personal courage." Your act will inspire me to keep seeking out and creating new opportunities, no matter how challenging things feel.