

Rob Ross Finds Breath; Rebuilds Life

by Debby Zelman Rapoport

Most of us take breathing for granted because it's an automatic process that works without our consciously thinking about it. Rob Ross is an exception, and he is most grateful for breath. Almost thirty years ago, he turned tragedy and heartbreak into opportunity, growth and song. Today, he is full of life, energy and enthusiasm, and his words and actions motivate people around him to recognize that they are more capable than they may have ever thought.

As a child, Rob was surrounded by music and love of the arts. He started playing piano at age five, guitar at seven, and discovered theater in high school. He loved performing and entertaining, and recalls the performance of his life, which took place on May 2, 1992, just a day before an accident that would forever change his path.

Rob was born and raised in Oakland, California. While still on a high from his prior night's performance, he and three friends headed to the beach. Two then went to pick up food, and Rob and his buddy stayed by the pristine waters of the Pacific Ocean to go swimming. When they approached the water's edge, both dove in, but Rob misjudged the water's depth and hit his forehead on the ocean floor.

"I dove into the sand and was pretty sure I had taken my last breath," Rob told us. Although he never lost consciousness, he was floating face down, unable to move, and was later diagnosed with a broken fifth cervical vertebrae and severed spinal cord.

"My chest began to tighten from lack of breath. There was no bright light, no tunnel, no theatrical moment, and no angels singing," he told us. "I just thought, 'this is it: I'm going to die.'"

Rob's friend, the only one who had stayed behind to swim, had lifeguard training, saw him, turned him over, stabilized his neck, dragged him to the shore, and saved his life.

"At the time, I felt confusion, chaos, and misunderstanding," Rob recalled. "Now, I see it very clearly as a second chance at life – a moment to never take for granted. I then had a wake-up call, thinking, as famously coined by John Allen Saunders, 'life is what happens to us while we're making other plans.'"

Rob had a long road to recovery. He was airlifted to the hospital, underwent surgeries, had months of rehab, and learned to adapt to living in a wheelchair. He had to relearn life in a foreign body. "It was a challenge to cope with pieces of myself I had lost," he said.

In spite of serious obstacles in those early months, Rob still thought that life would somehow be what it was before. Then, as summer faded and his girlfriend headed off to college, they broke up, and Rob had his first cathartic cry. "This was not going to be life as normal," he recalled. "I knew that I had to make a choice: to embrace my new reality or live in the past and give up."

Giving up was not an option. Rob awoke the next day and knew that he needed to refocus his mind on the future, not the past. "I went into the physical therapy director's office and told her that I wanted to sing again. That was how I would find my way back."

As a quadriplegic, Rob did not have voluntary muscle movement or feeling below his chest. Neither did he have the breath control necessary to sing

a note, let alone an entire song. Singing was a stretch goal, yet he was determined to succeed. His therapists told him it would be a long road, yet one that they would help him on if he was willing to add additional therapy sessions to his current rehab program.

"And so I began. I had my full day's regimen of physical and occupational therapy. Then, during my 'rest periods,' we added several hours per day toward my ultimate goal. Eventually, I found my breath and then, my voice," Rob told us. "Breathing is a blessing. It is at the core of who we are to be alive, and it is the most important element you need to sing. Finding myself all over again through my breath was a renewal. Breathing in and exhaling would first become a note, then a measure, and then a song."

Rob sang in his first concert a year after being released from the hospital.

"Although I acknowledged that my acting days might be over, I went back to my old high school, where the theater director, Dennis Kohles, my life mentor, taught me how to direct. That's where I found my voice as a speaker and director."

Rob gained confidence, built relationships, and created a life that he didn't think he'd have again. His love for theater never faded. He was accepted to the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television. Then, in 1999, after a year-long internship at a professional theater company, with encouragement from other directors, he enrolled in the liberal arts program at Oberlin College and moved to Cleveland.

"I moved away from everything comfortable, everyone and everything that I had ever known, to begin again: to study theater and dramatic literature. Oberlin became my new home," he said. "After graduation, I worked at Great Lakes Theatre Festival, just past September 11, 2001, and then took a year off to travel the country – driving to 48 states and flying to Hawaii – because I realized, yet again, that time was a precious commodity not to be wasted."

When Rob returned from his cross-country adventure, and after working in the private sector, he joined several volunteer committees at The Temple-Tifereth Israel, tasked with creating a new vision for congregational transformation through the arts.

"Whether in high school, rehab, or the synagogue, community and togetherness are truly special. In a synagogue environment, the combination is sacred, holy, and unique," he said. "This experience evolved into a project that would change my life again."

The committee's vision and initial program – an idea Rob proposed for a huge arts festival called FestAviv (Hebrew for SpringFest) – turned into a 3-year pilot program and



Rob and Maggie singing "Going to the Temple," to the tune of "Going to the Chapel." Photo Credits: Thaddeus Badowski.

eventually morphed into a position as Temple arts director, which lasted for 12 years.

"Along with FestAviv, the Temple Arts Program empowered and transformed the congregation by interconnecting multigenerational programs focused in the arts, community, and creative expression," Rob explained. "The synagogue is where we celebrate our highest joys and deepest sorrows – events that provide sacred opportunities for something so much larger than ourselves."

Rob fell in love with the environment and found new ways to express himself as a cantorial soloist. He currently serves as a guest soloist at various synagogues, and is also the service leader at Cleveland Hillel, where he created a new approach to leading inclusive, welcoming, and participatory shabbat services, a model he hopes to introduce to other Hillel organizations around the country.

"I can't put into words the joy that I get through prayer and song," Rob said. "No matter how much I speak, I'm at my most expressive when I sing, when my spirit has an opportunity to let loose and reach something bigger than myself."

That's an understatement. It's very inspirational to hear Rob in his element. His voice, smile, demeanor, and spirit lift his audiences and leave them wanting to come back for more.

Rob worked at The Temple until the start of the pandemic, and is currently launching Rob Ross Arts, a three-pronged business that creates opportunities for him to continue doing what he loves most:

- Custom consulting: working strategically with organizations, both spiritual and secular, to identify areas for greater cohesion; to help reimagine their broader community

through innovation and creative expression.

- Utilize his singing and musical skills to uplift, inspire, and transform both religious and non-religious settings.
- Expand upon his keynote and motivational speaking opportunities to allow participants to connect his words and lessons to their own.

Rob invites you to visit his website, www.robrossarts.com, for more information on his new endeavor. (The site will be live soon, watch for more information next month). His energy and attitude are contagious, and he welcomes the opportunity to connect and collaborate with all.

Through his journey, Rob learned that he is not unique. "We each have something that may lift us up or push us to bury our head in the sand. I made a choice to embrace and make the most of my disability. We each have moments to make a similar choice. We can stagnate or we can choose life. Choose breath. Choose to overcome. Although we all have different challenges, in many respects, we are the same. The most valuable lesson I carry through life is the meaning of gratitude – gratitude for life's challenges and gratitude for life's blessings."

Rob is most grateful for his wife Maggie, daughter Olive, parents, sister, friends, and family who keep him going and lift him up.

"I celebrate who I am and what I have today because of the support of those surrounding me. They make me smile and bring me ultimate joy," Rob said. "I believe wholeheartedly that at the end of the day, we all look back on our experiences and find joy and pain. I have moments when I dwell in both, that's only natural. If you can grab onto those moments of joy, gratitude, luck, spirituality, humility, and love and make the most of them, then you have a chance to achieve a life that is truly special."

Rob is a joyful, gifted vocalist, a creative impresario, and a collaborative colleague. His baritone is warm, resonant, and evocative, and his courage and perseverance inspire; a soulful spirituality enhances everything he undertakes. Partnering with Rob is a rare privilege."

Rabbi Richard A. Block, past president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis; Senior Rabbi Emeritus, The Temple-Tifereth Israel

Combining humor, music, and amazing communication skills, Rob has the unique ability to bring people together to discuss complex issues in a safe manner. Rob is a teacher. His humble and caring demeanor creates an atmosphere that motivates people to hope, learn, create, and grow. It has been a personal and professional honor to work with him on multiple levels!"

Kathy Foley, executive director, Services For Independent Living, Cleveland (Retired)

Rob's role as a professional service leader is extraordinary, as his relaxed aura and spirit draw people in and make active participation so comfortable. He reaches well beyond that to connect with us on a personal basis, with warmth, concern and caring. If the community had 100 Rob Rosses, we would be a stronger, more loving, more gentle, peaceful community."

Joel Fox, former chief development officer, Menorah Park; former executive VP, Jewish Federation of Cleveland

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