

# Rosemary Tran Lauer

## Daring to Care

Had Rosemary Tran Lauer learned to swim, her life would have been very different.

If she had ever been taught how, it is very likely that she would have leapt off the boat that day in April of 1975, with her three-year-old son and six-month-old daughter clutched in her arms. That day, she had been wandering the docks of Vietnam in search of her husband when a sailor, thinking she intended to come aboard his ship like so many other South Vietnamese at the brink of the fall of Saigon, whisked her son onto the deck. By the time she was able to run up the gangplank and recover the boy, throngs of refugees were already pressing in, desperate to flee the country and certain persecution in the wake of the Vietnam War. Violence broke out in the marina, and the ship was forced to disembark even as its captain was still trapped in the crowds on the dock.

With no food and only the clothes on their backs, Rosemary and her two children were taken to Guam, never to see her husband again. After ten days of misery at sea, they arrived at the island nation and settled in a tent city along with other refugees, struggling to survive and to piece together the sudden twist of fate that had ripped them from their home. "I've had a lot of challenges in my life, but I find they always happen for good reasons," Rosemary explains today.

Since she launched Devotion To Children, a volunteer-based organization dedicated to promoting quality early childcare for underprivileged families, these good reasons number in the hundreds and continue to multiply—and each one has a name, a face, and a future. Fueled by the passion and commitment of its idealistic volunteers, Devotion To Children raises funds to help pay for the care of children under six years of age while their parents go to work or attend school—an issue that hits very

close to home for Rosemary.

By another twist of fate, Rosemary found herself in the right place at the right time in the tent city in Guam. She was able to appear in a news segment airing in the US, which led to her being sponsored to make the last leg of the journey to America, where she settled in Washington, D.C. The International Rescue Committee had organized a site for refugee housing in the city, and Rosemary was issued a small efficiency in which to make a new start. She hardly knew any English at all, but she knew she had to provide for her children. Unable to afford childcare, she asked a neighboring family to watch over her son and daughter as she struck out in search of employment.

When Rosemary was approached by the owner of the Arabian restaurant next door and offered a job as a waitress, she didn't hesitate. "My survival instinct is quite strong," she says. "I couldn't pronounce any English words, but I could read the numbers on the menu. Customers could point to the

number, and I could then report that to the kitchen. I memorized every item number, and I did a lot of smiling."

The income helped, but at such a low wage, Rosemary knew she needed something more. In no time she found herself working three jobs, toiling around the clock to provide for her children, whom she rarely saw. Eventually, however, her working conditions turned dangerous, and she knew it was time to try a different approach. With that, she went on welfare and, with the help of government education aid for refugees, enrolled in cosmetology school.

"Everything I do, with the grace of God, I do with all my heart," says Rosemary. This exceptional investment of true heart and soul shone in the uncommon elegance with which she tended her clients. One such client was quick to





admire her unparalleled skill and offered to go into business with Rosemary, proposing to purchase the salon herself and to split the profits with the talented beautician while she ran the business.

With that, a true entrepreneur was born, and in just several short years, Rosemary's salon was already enjoying more success than others who had been in the business for twenty years. A dispute with her business partner, however, later compelled her to leave the establishment to start up another salon, which she operated for 17 very successful years.

While successful, these years were not without their trials. The driven businesswoman married a man with two children from a previous marriage, and after they had three more, Rosemary found herself raising all seven while balancing the demands of the salon. When the pair later divorced and she was left with no child support or alimony, life grew more demanding still, yet she remained as committed and headstrong as ever, driven toward success by an inner fire that would never flicker. "I started all over again, selling my old salon and then starting a new one that was over double in size, with several dozen employees," Rosemary recalls.

As she pursued success as a business owner, she also used this persistent inner fire to found Devotion To Children in 1994, and since that day, Rosemary and her team have worked tirelessly to address a need that truly lies at the root of our society's well being. "We talk about breaking the cycle of poverty, but sometimes we miss the mark because we're not focusing on the fact that children are the future," she points out. "For every one dollar we invest in a child now, we save 18 dollars down the road by putting that child on a path that is healthy and productive. If we don't help these children early on in their most formative years, we're not only hurting each child, but also ourselves and the whole of society."

Throughout the six years of single motherhood that followed her divorce, Rosemary's efforts with Devotion To Children aimed to fill the certain void in society that she, herself, was struggling through. Then, in 1999, she met her current husband, Bill Lauer, through her efforts with Devotion To Children and decided to sell her successful salon business to finally have more time with her family.

As fate would have it, she was diagnosed with breast cancer 2001, yet ever the survivor, she

triumphed over the disease with characteristic vigor. At that point, she decided to start over yet again, but this time in an entirely different field — real estate. "Because of my experience as a business owner, commercial real estate came very naturally to me, even though it is a heavily male-dominated field," she explains. "As an Asian American woman in that environment, my clients really like me."

One can be certain these clients have rarely met anyone who works as hard or with as much spirit as Rosemary does, and it is with this same spirit that she continues the work of Devotion To Children today. Affordable, quality childcare is nearly impossible to find in the DC metro area, with waiting lists for such organizations extending several hundred names long. This is particularly troubling in light of research indicating that the first three years of a child's life are the most important in that the fundamental processes of life are developing at their most rapid pace.

Recognizing the vital importance of this early intellectual stimulation, interaction, and support, Devotion To Children directs its services at assisting children under the age of six, as formal schooling helps to alleviate the burden of care after that point. "So many families can barely survive or afford food, let alone books," says Rosemary, all too familiar with the stark reality of that fact. "In a perfect world, men and women should be able to give their all in the workplace, knowing that their children are being cared for by nurturing professionals. Devotion To Children is committed to bringing us a little closer to that perfect world. That's my dream."

This is not only Rosemary's dream, but also the passion of Devotion To Children's committed team of eight board members and 42 young volunteers, who clock in countless hours on top of their regular jobs to ensure that the initiative remains successful. Thanks to their efforts, the organization's fundraising success continues to escalate by 25 percent annually despite the recession. Sponsors rest assured knowing that every penny of their donations goes directly to funding the cause, which impacts hundreds of lives each year through the support of daycare facilities, extended childcare programs, Head Start libraries, and scholarships for children under six.

What is perhaps most striking about Rosemary's character is not merely the magnitude of her impact in the wake of incredible adversity,



but more so the fact that she has been able to maintain an openness and innocence of spirit that is so often decimated by the trials of modern society. It's as if she chose to treat her hardships not as weights, but as balloons, elevating her to loftier goals and bigger dreams. "I've always been very naïve and trusting, so if someone criticizes me, I believe that they're telling me the truth and I don't disregard it," she explains. "If it's something I can't change about myself, then I accept it. If it's something I can change, I change it. This allows me to be very accepting of reality, without the clouding that comes when people take criticism too personally. I accept reality as it is, pairing this with a fierce determination to always do better, and I believe that the 'ideal world' people so often refer to should be treated as a viable objective to strive for."

What if every person in America lived their lives with the kind of passion that inundates Rosemary's story? It is a passion born not only in perseverance, but also in a deeply rooted, genuine belief in humanity's ability to transcend the adversity that falls in its path. "When we hear about problems today, so many people will just say that they don't care," Rosemary reflects. "Something I am still trying to understand is how to instill in people the desire to change things, because these things affect everyone."

Indeed, Americans today so often assume an attitude of powerlessness in the face of the larger social issues that plague our nation.

Perhaps it is that the ills of our society seem so monumental that one person couldn't possibly make a difference, so why try?

"We *have* to care," insists one person—a small, first generation Vietnamese immigrant woman without a college education, who came to this country with nothing, but who believed in something. Now this woman works tirelessly to give back to the community that helped her to attain the grace and success of her full potential, and through Devotion To Children, this cycle of mutual betterment promises to extend far into the future.

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*President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit [www.BernhardtWealth.com](http://www.BernhardtWealth.com) and [Gordon's Blog](#).*



