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# MontclairNeighbors

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## The Roche Podwoski Family

Moving Us  
Forward with  
Fitness and Film

PHOTOGRAPH BY  
NEIL GRABOWSKY



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# The Roche/Podwoski Family

Moving Us Forward with Fitness and Film

BY CANDICE HOROWITZ

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NEIL GRABOWSKY / THROUGH THE LENS STUDIOS

**B**Y THE TIME Aran Roche and Matthew Podwoski set off on their cross country camping trip in 1997, to move from New York City to San Francisco, they had been dating on and off for five years. At the time, the couple, who had met as students at Lafayette College, had been living and working in New York: Aran, as Associate Director at an art gallery, and Matt, teaching 7th grade social studies in Brooklyn. But when Aran was accepted into a graduate program for museum studies at San Francisco State University, it was the perfect excuse for them to head west on a new adventure.

In preparation for the trip, they gathered the necessary gear. With Aran's knack for organization, all the essentials on their packing list were soon accounted for, with



The happy couple traveled back from CA to get married on July 23, 2000 in Verona with family and friends.

the exception of one crucial item: a driver's license for Matt. "I had to teach him how to drive first," explained Aran. Having grown up in Park Slope, Brooklyn, Matt's bicycle had always been his preferred mode of transportation. "I rode my bike all over New York or took a train," he explained.

But what Matt lacked in driving prowess, he more than made up for with the camping expertise he garnered as a child. "We never owned a car growing up. So my family vacation was stuffing the kids in a rental car and going to the Adirondacks or Maine. We would pick up the car in Manhattan at 46th Street and then we'd take a subway home after we dropped the

car off. We did a lot of National Parks with my dad so when Aran and I moved cross country, I just plotted out the trip. We probably hit 15 or more national parks."

Aran, who was raised in Verona, had never experienced that kind of foray into the wilderness until she met Matt. "My family never ever went camping," she said. "My parents were from Ireland and we'd go to the Jersey shore in the summer. That was about it. So he definitely showed me those ropes. But I was a quick study and I loved it."

Recently, Aran and Matt, now married and living in Montclair with their 16-year-old son, Seamus, dusted off that same camping kit for their own family trip to Vermont. "We hadn't camped in a long time until early this summer," Aran said. "We went to meet friends up in Vermont. Especially in Covid time, to be out under the stars and outside twenty-four seven, it was soothing to the soul."

Aside from occasional excursions, like many people these days, Aran, Matt and Seamus and their Golden Doodle, Bear, have spent an inordinate amount of time in their house in the South End of Montclair, a place that Matt says truly feels like home. "For me, having a sense of place and home in Montclair has been awesome because I had that growing up in Brooklyn. And moving here we wanted Seamus to have that same sense of place with the community: going to the public schools, playing with all the local sports organizations, volunteering around town, and having a whole network of people that can kind of look after him and watch out for him. He rides his bike around and that's kind of how I socialized as well. And so I'm happy for him."

For Seamus, a childhood in Montclair has also meant playing competitive soccer and lacrosse, which he learned at an early age from his dad. "We have pictures of him on his changing table with a lacrosse stick in his hand," said Aran.

Matt, himself, played on the first public high school lacrosse team in Brooklyn post World War II. "We created a team at Midwood High. It's still there. We had a wonderful experience competing against private schools throughout the tri-state area." Now as a dad, Matt has been able to share his enthusiasm for the sport with Seamus as a coach and mentor. "It's a way for us to connect and chitchat. I remember when I was growing up and I'd play baseball with my dad and we'd talk. Sea and I still do the same thing."

In 2011, Matt parlayed his love of lacrosse into a business when he started running clinics, camps, and competitive travel teams with Evolution Lacrosse Academy. "It's an opportunity for coaches locally to be amongst the community and really make a difference. And we're helping kids with the recruiting process to get them into college to play lacrosse."

As his academy approaches its ten-year anniversary, they've been faced with a new challenge - safely managing a program of five to eighteen-year-olds during the pandemic. "We're doing all the health checks and communicating with families," Matt explained. "We have a lot of programming coming up and we're happy to provide opportunities for kids in the communities to get out and get some fresh air and play. I could count on both hands the number of kids who said this was the highlight of their summer."

Being in Montclair has also brought Aran closer to her



Aran and Matt at Montclair Film's 5th Birthday Party Fundraiser in 2016.

hometown of Verona where she still has close friends and family. "Verona is a unique place," she said. "It's tiny. My graduating class had around a hundred kids in it, a quarter who I grew up with from kindergarten all the way through. We would show up in a heartbeat for each other."

Professionally, Aran has found her niche in Montclair as the Director of Development for the Montclair Film Festival. "I've learned throughout my career that doing what you don't like to do will get you closer and closer to what you love." It was during the time she and Matt were living in San Francisco that Aran made the fortuitous discovery of her knack for writing grants and how well it paired with her interest in the arts. "It was

an awesome experience out there," she recalled. "I worked at the Bay Area Discovery Museum, a really great hands-on learning museum for kids. I was managing an education program that was grant-funded at that job and was totally turned on to the fact that funding for arts programs is a great way to impact the program."

Aran describes her role as that of a translator between departments telling stories through budgets. "Grants scare the crap out of people often," she said, "but I love grant writing. It's a lot of telling the story in advance of it actually happening. You really



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June, 1997. Matt and Aran at a friend’s wedding before they hit the road to move to California (left). 10-year-old Seamus at Evolution Lacrosse’s Summer Camp in 2014 (middle). Aran and Matt on their road trip out west. Summer, 1997.

need to show the impact and the change that you’re going to instill through this program. Asking for money isn’t fun unless it’s for a compelling program that fills a need, engages a community.”

With that mission in mind, Aran has been part of the festival team that’s brought film lovers to Montclair from all over the tri-state area and beyond for the past nine years. “What’s really great for the film festival is that there’s a film that speaks to anyone’s mission,” said Aran, “so it’s fun to fundraise for because it’s not another chicken dinner. Our events are different. They’re meaningful. The community conversations and panels often open people’s

eyes to different possibilities. Film is that unique vehicle that brings people together to learn about themselves and each other.”

Every year thousands of people gather in Montclair for MFF’s most anticipated event, their annual film festival. This year, however, will be an exception. In early March, as a new virus began to wreak havoc across the globe, Executive Director, Tom Hall, made a swift decision to postpone the festival which was scheduled to begin on May 1st. “We were so fortunate that we were able to hit the pause button when we did,” Aran shared. “We were ready to go into full design of our festival program guide. We were about to bring in our team of festival staff from across the country. But Tom really saw the writing on the wall and realized what was happening.”

Fortunately, the organization’s small staff was able to shift their focus to reimagine the festival and create a viable event in the midst of the global pandemic. “Tom was so super clear that we were not canceling,” said Aran. “We’re a small organization. We’re a really creative organization. So we shifted all our programs to virtual platforms.”

The festival program will be announced on October 2nd, followed by ten days of online screenings and virtual events starting on October 16th. This year’s festival has also been uniquely outfitted with Carpool Theater, a custom drive-in movie program. “People are stuck at home watching what’s on Netflix,” said Aran. “Barely any cinemas around the country are running. So Tom and his team are working with studios and distribution companies to get some terrific new films that no one is seeing right now for double features for these drive-ins.”

Carpool Theater will be located at the Archery Field in the South Mountain Recreation Complex in West Orange. “It’s a beautiful venue,” Aran said. “I think it’s going to be gorgeous in October. The leaves are changing. And it’s safe and it’s spread out.”

“It’s definitely different,” shared Aran. “But the drive-ins will be a lot of fun. We’ll still have an opening night and we’re going to be as creative as possible. Think step and repeat for your car rather than walking the red carpet at the Wellmont. There’s so much to look forward to. It’s going to be great!” ■



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