

AT THE PODIUM

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STORIES

ABOUT

ROSA MAX: DOMESTIC ABUSE SURVIVOR TURNED CITY FARMER



Rosa Max, 45, in her backyard getting ready to feed her sheep. Photograph by Yasser Marte.

Written by: Yasser Marte

Entering Rosa Max's patio, a friendly black and white pit bull named Maggie, sniffs around at the door, greeting those that step on to the property. Max, 45, waves hello from the second flight of

pink stairs, at her Silver Lake home.

Max's children Benjamin Goudsmit, 5, and Devra Goudsmit, 4, can be heard laughing and playing from outside the home.

Max softly speaks with a European accent. She cautions her children to play carefully, then laughs a bit at their rambunctious behavior.

Max is known in her neighborhood for advocating environmental awareness, local farming and food growth. She also encourages her community to participate in the Urban Farming Incentive Zone Act. Los Angeles adapted UAIZ into city Code last month. It allows property owners of vacant lots to participate in community agricultural projects, like food gardens.

In return, the city will reward the property owner with a five year city tax break. Max advocates for environmental agencies such as Bee Rescue and Ancient Solutions. Ancient Solutions is an agency who's mission, according to their website, is to spread "The Green Ripple Effect" by promoting and helping others to obtain a more sustainable lifestyle. But if one were to ask Max if she is an environmentalist, she would say no.

"I'm not an environmentalist," Max said sitting outside on the steps of her staircase. Max separates herself from the environmentalist label because she feels that her environmental ethics are not practiced to it's purest form.

Inside Max's home there is a wooden balcony that looks out to the Silver Lake Reservoir. Hammocks hang on her deck as colorful Christmas bulbs casually hover over. The children's beds are constructed out of large tree trunks that Max built herself. The back yard is home to two dogs, a goat, half a dozen sheep, a few chickens, and a beehive.

In her soft European accent, she motions to talk outside and take advantage of the California sunshine.

Are you an environmentalist?

I consider myself a 'wannabe' environmentalist. I wish I can live a conscious life and act upon it. Not just talk the talk but walk the walk.

I'm more like an accidental city farmer.

Accidental city farmer?

It started because I wanted to help out my landlord who was underwater with real estate. I didn't know what that meant, but he showed me his portfolio and said, 'I'm underwater. I need you to help me get these lady bugs on the farmers market.' I was like, 'What do you mean?'

He's the Ladybug Landlord.

Ladybug man?

He's kind of this strange almost fictional character that helps his tenants if they were broke and couldn't pay their rent. He would give them lady bugs and the tenants would sell those lady bugs and pay their rent with it.

How much would a person make off of one ladybug? How much a pop?

You know those gumball machines? They would have those little eggs. He would fill them with like a hundred lady bugs and then they would sell for like three bucks or two for five. Something like that. I admire that he did that.

He had some entomologist interest. He read a lot of nature magazines. So he was into environmental solutions. He got me into putting the ladybugs, on the tomato plants, to keep the Aphids away.

Yeah, this landlord taught me all kinds of stuff I can sell. I was setting all these farmer markets stands for him. Then I started making websites for his environmental projects and he taught me how to get all these environmental projects pushed.

He inspired me a lot with his out of the box imagination.

When did you start coming across all these animals?

So I got into lady bugs, then I got into the bees, I have four boxes of bee hives. Then the preying mantis and certain kinds of snails. I got the *Bee Rescue* network launched and I got a mentor in saving honey bees from structures. I was using bee venom for my pain and they were helping me, but of course they die.

I felt like I had to do something back. I started realizing how important bees were so I started rescuing honey bees. My mentor taught me different methods. Sometimes the bees would leave young bees behind, brood, which apparently are very nutritional for chickens.

So he said if I had chickens I can feed them these broods. So I wanted to have chickens. I found out the hard way what chickens are good for city breeds.



Three of Rosa's sheep looking forward to food at her backyard. (Photograph by Yasser Marte)

Okay so you're going from ladybugs, to bees, to chickens, and now I see how this farm is growing. You talk a lot about your community. You especially advocate for food and local farm growth for the neighborhood.

Yeah. I feel like we have to find a common green ground in the city. No matter what culture, ethnicity, age, or class you come from. We need to be able to join forces to share resources to grow food together.

You also mentioned the importance for the future of your children.

There was a life changing moment for me. I was pregnant and the relationship I had was scary. It was not good. The love of my life soon turned into a domestic violence situation too, which made it more important for me to survive with him in the kind of prison bubble that he created around me. It was very hard.

How do you come out of something like that?

In the beginning I didn't come out of it. It took me three years. I was drugged the whole time during my pregnancy by these doctors. I was over medicated on opiates during both my pregnancies by five different doctors. I was basically numbed by opiates prescribed by my doctors for my condition for years.

You were prescribed opiates during your pregnancy? How's that possible?

I had the OBGYN, the prenatal care, the neurosurgeon, the orthopedic surgeon, and the pediatrician, sign off on high doses of opiates, of the hydrocodon and vicodin family, during my pregnancy.

They said I would have to survive to carry out those pregnancies, I was 40 and 41 years old.

So they prescribed opiates because you were older?

Yeah and I have like a bad back. I do notice lately I have rheumatoid arthritis symptoms. I have morning stiffness in my hands. If you are numbed by something as strong as opiates, you tolerate a lot more than something as a strong woman would. Something I remember myself to be. I would never slip into a domestic violence relationship, which turned into a cliché.

When was the moment that you realized that you need to get out of this? The straw that broke the camel's back?

It was when I ended up in the Barcelona hospital. I gave birth to my second child. It turned out to be a disastrous birth. The doctors in Barcelona realized that I was heavily medicated on opiates. They were on the phone with the American doctors wondering what's going on.

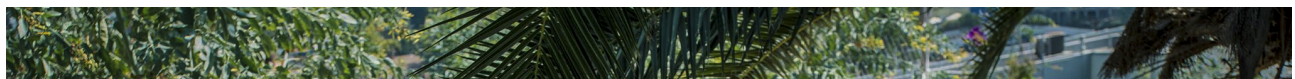
The Barcelona doctors decided to take me off the opiates. I had gone cold turkey before I gave birth. She [her daughter, Devra] became a high risk birth. My daughter was immediately taken away from me for three days. She was a high risk for respiratory problems because I was taken off opiates way to sudden.

Are you off the opiates?

Yes. Never went back.

And is your kid okay?

She's fine. Look at her running around.





Max's daughter Devra Goudsmit, 4, playing with her toys in the backyard. (Photograph by September Dawn Bottoms)

When did you leave your husband?

He was not my husband but the father of my children. It was much more complicated. He was apparently suffering mental issues and because of his family's strict faith he was not allowed to see any doctors or psychologist.

He was born Catholic but his mother converted to an extreme Christian faith. I forgot the name of church her mother was practicing. I don't want to give wrong information.

But there was no doctor, no psychiatrist, only talk to the priest. He was mentally ill so I basically had a third baby there. He was my third baby, the father of my children. He had attacks sometimes but he didn't want to talk about it. He didn't want to address it.

What was the illness, if you don't mind?

He lost it. He had an episode in court. It was very sad. It was a schizophrenic psychosis. He had made a phone call to child services and made all these horrific accusations about me.

The child services lady, who was very nice, investigated and saw what was really going on. There was all kinds of drama. I'm just very very happy that I got out of drugs, and those opiates, and I was able to be together enough, and sober enough.

Given everything that you've said...It's been quite a year for women. How do you feel as a woman?

It's a hard life for a woman. I struggled with it. I lost my social life obviously because my relationship did a lot of damage to my family. If you think that the life that you live goes with needing children, if you have children for selfish reasons because you want someone to love you, if you didn't want children simply for the purpose for bringing good to this world then I say stay away from it.

I know for myself that is the core reason for procreating, was to make good creatures. We need good creatures to save this planet.

Do you have a philosophy to which you live naturally?

Yeah. Remember the past, live the present, and trust the future. Give a man fish and he'll eat for a day but teach a man to fish and he'll eat forever.

How do you apply your ideology?

In teaching my children how to fish. It could be something that small but it symbolizes a lot.



Rosa Max playfully whispers into her daughter Devra's ear. (Photograph by September Dawn Bottoms)