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STRONG
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TIRELESS
GENUINE
GRACIOUS
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HARDWORKING

DEBBY RIVERA

A Piece of My Heart

BY LISA STAMOS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS BALSAMO

THE LAST THING I EVER EXPECTED to hear from Debby Rivera at the top our interview is that she met Janis Joplin and got her autograph. It came right out of the blue as we sat down in an empty and quiet Ambrosia to talk about her life. How did a centered, hometown girl from Minnesota meet a such a significant rock icon? Joplin was widely-known as an uncompromising artist, charismatic, successful, and top-selling in her business. Was it foreshadowing of how Debby would rock her own future, one day?

Deborah Lesley grew up in Minnesota and at 11, her family moved to Chicago for her dad's job transfer. He was an executive for Columbia Records. In 1967, the family went to Beverly Hills for a Columbia Records artist showcase where the label's artists—Bobby Vinton, Eydie Gormé, Bob Dylan, Simon & Garfunkel, and yes, Janis Joplin—were performing. It was in the hotel ladies room that Debby ran into Janis. Debby's love of music today had a strong start with her dad being in the music industry.

Lilly, Debby's mom, stayed at home to raise the kids. "She was very vivacious, and outgoing, and we thought even a little crazy," Debby said. "We only had one car, and one day, mom took the four of us kids out to a busy street near the house, since dad had the car, and she stuck her thumb out. We hitchhiked to Minneapolis for the day since there we no buses." Lilly is 92 and has a job in Naples, Fla., where she promotes her daughter's business to patrons of The Arlington, her employer, many of whom are from the Barrington area.

Debby credits her parents for her faith, her driving and sustaining force. "My parents had deep faith, yet they were a real mix," Debby said. Her mom is a Jewish Holocaust survivor, and her dad, a staunch Catholic. "My parents were married for 50 years, and watching them taught me the art of compromise," Debby said. "My parents never felt threatened to give our faith any labels."

The family settled down in Arlington Heights and Debby attended the first graduating class of Rolling Meadows' new high school. She then attended Columbia College in Chicago, majoring in communications. "I fell in love with Chicago, it's my favorite city in the world," she said. Her first job at age 14 was at The Barn of Barrington, in The Carvery room. There, old-world style service made an impression on Debby, who was a bus girl. "My mom worked there in the Carvery as a waitress, and while she helped me get the job, she also let me know I could not embarrass her, a hardworking employee. This was the beginning of Debby's training in hard work and high expectations.

Debby's next job—and her nose—led her to meet Richard Rivera, whom she would marry, while both were working at the Schaumburg Hyatt. She worked the night shift in the hotel bar, and to get to her locker after work, she had to



walk through the hotel's kitchen. Before she even met Richard, who was starting his shift late at night baking, she noticed the delicious smells of pastries in the kitchen. They became fast friends as Richard's career began taking off. He moved to The Westin in Chicago, then to Nashville at the Vanderbilt Hotel, a high-profile job. Then the Hunt family in Texas hired Richard to work at the Remington Hotel in Houston. Debby stayed in Chicago to finish college.

About four years into their relationship, Richard was offered a job at the Charles Hotel in Cambridge, Mass., as the executive pastry chef. He asked Debby to go with him. Using her degree in communications, Debby took a job with CBS Radio in Boston in programming and promotions. But her first job in the station was working for a tough manager in accounting. "I learned the best lessons, ones I use today, from her," Debby said. "Rules such as keep it simple, avoid office drama, and how to file billing for timely payments."

Debby and Richard decided to move back to Chicago to start their own business. Their first plan was to buy a bakery, but they couldn't find one that met their criteria—that is, the kind of place they would want to go and enjoy themselves, a place that was an experience. So, they started Ambrosia Euro-American Patisserie in a small retail space in Fox River Grove. At the urging of a couple in Barrington Hills, Barbara and Alexander McArthur, the two moved their business to Barrington.

The work experiences of Richard and Debby perfectly added up to a place that anyone would enjoy with the finest of pastries, desserts, and customer service. Many of the items people enjoy today come directly from their previous job experiences. The whipped cream for coffee Debby learned at The Carvery at The Barn of Barrington. The raisin bran muffins came from Boston. The blueberry muffins are from the Remington in Texas. Those hot caramel pecan rolls? That recipe is from the Milk Pail in Dundee. The gracious welcome? It's who Richard and Debby are and all the wonderful experiences that shaped them.

Debby and her children, Gabe and Flora, have weathered the ultimate storm in the past year with Richard's passing. His gift was to openly share the family's recipes with Ambrosia employees, leave behind books of photos showing cake designs, and a legacy of modeling hard work and devotion to his craft, and his family.

"People value that we are still here," Debby says of carrying on the business with the help of her rock-solid faith. "We have earned a place in other families' hearts. We play a small role, have a small place, and it's an honor for us."

HERE ARE SOME WORDS THAT OTHERS SHARED ABOUT **DEBBY RIVERA**.

Linda Barrett, FRIEND

Besides being a tireless and enthusiastic business owner, Deb lifts her employees through her mentoring mindset, conscientious support, and demonstration of her own diligent work ethic. The thing I feel blessed to know about Deb can best be described by my mom's brilliant observations and interactions with her. After one of our wonderful visits with Deb at Ambrosia, my mom turned to me as we were leaving and remarked, "You know... Debbie radiates love... you can feel it when you are with her, from the way she looks at you when she speaks, to her calm gentle voice...yes, she radiates love." This is a truth. This woman, this friend, this business owner, mentor, wise woman—is filled with grace. I once read that there are certain people on the planet whose positive energy can diminish negativity simply because they resonate at a higher energy. That is what I believe to be true of Deb—that she elevates the planet and lifts our humanity with her unwavering kindness, generosity, profound empathy, and her illuminating love. What an honor to recognize her as the Quintessential person she is.

Theresa Boyd, TEACHER, BARRINGTON 220

Debby Rivera has an incredibly generous heart and noble spirit, and Ambrosia Patisserie's warm environment is the best reflection of that. The atmosphere at Ambrosia evidences Debby's values; it is staffed by family, friends, and local youths, who may be working behind the counter at their first job. Debby uses Ambrosia as a resource for much of the service work she provides for the community—for children, young adults, college students, and causes of the underprivileged. I have never met a person as generous and selfless as Debby. She listens intently to people's needs, has a sixth sense about her, and then provides support to those in need. Everything she does for people, she does quietly, humbly, and gracefully. If you haven't had the pleasure of meeting Debby yet, I suggest you make a trip into Ambrosia. Not only will it be the very best way you can possibly start your day, you will also meet a phenomenal woman whose presence in your life will make it forever richer!

Grayson Claes, FORMER EMPLOYEE

I was fortunate enough to be in Debby and Richard's life when I was 17 and attending Barrington High School. She and Chef gave me an opportunity to be part of the team at Ambrosia. I spent many hours in the hot kitchen honing my skills through them. Debby and Chef gave me the foundation and courage to be able to succeed in this industry. It's hard to believe but a decade has past. I'm no longer at Ambrosia, instead I'm in pastry at Eleven Madison Park in NYC. Yet there isn't a day that goes by that I don't hear Chef in my head critiquing my work to which I always say, 'Yes Chef'. And the image that comes to mind is Debby's smile and reprimanding stare directed at Chef. I am forever grateful to be a part of the Rivera family. Chef, Debby, Flora, and Gabe, I miss and love you all. See you soon.



Chrissi Cowhey, FRIEND

Debby Rivera is one of our family's dearest friends. My mother began a friendship with her and Richard when they first opened Ambrosia over 25 years ago in Fox River Grove (and baby Flora was toted in her crib daily to work with them). I was gifted with that friendship by association with my mom. Many years later, while I was home for the holidays on break from graduate school, I had the amazing opportunity to work in the kitchen with Richard and his incredible staff and witness Debby's own art of customer service from behind the scenes. From my earliest memories, I recall being wide-eyed and amazed by the stunning pastries in the display cases and the warm smiles and kindness with which they were brought out to customers. Because of this, it always seemed like a magical place—and it always will.

Michelle Damico, CEO,

MICHELLE DAMICO COMMUNICATIONS

Debby and I reconnected in Barrington several years after she and I worked together at WXRT-FM in Chicago. I was a news reporter and newscaster, and she interned in the Promotions Department. Our lives and careers went in different directions and 20 years later, I stopped in Ambrosia and our friendship was reignited! Everything she does embodies the spirit of love. She is one of the most worldly and compassionate people I know. She is passionately concerned about the future of our country, our planet, and looks for constructive ways to solve the injustices faced by the oppressed. Debby created a fundraiser at Ambrosia for her friend, Chef Rob Macey, of the former Harvest Moon Café, when he faced numerous health setbacks. Chicago's restaurant community rallied behind her in support of Rob and his family. I was also struck by the immense outpouring of love that was given to Debby, Gabe and Flora, after Richard's passing. The Rivera Family is immensely respected and loved in Barrington, Cary, and Crystal Lake. It's so wonderful to see now how Flora and Gabe have followed in their parents' footsteps.

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Hannah Dennison, FORMER EMPLOYEE

I worked as a baker at Ambrosia Patisserie for seven years. One memory that I treasure with Debby came as the flurry of the early morning bake was going on. My coworker, Rachel, and I had been at the patisserie for an hour and the ovens were at full capacity. We heard the jingle of the front door and knew that Debby had arrived. "Hannah! Rachel!" we heard her call. "You have to come outside!" Oven mitts in hand, we hurried out to where Debbie was gazing at the horizon as you would a Rembrandt. "Just look..." she said with awe, "at that sunrise!" Its beauty was reflecting Debby's character and perspective on life. A life she is determined to share to its fullest.

Flora Rivera Gorman, DAUGHTER

My mother embodies, in the rawest and most sincere form, love and light in everything she does. With passion and grace, she continues to make Ambrosia a safe haven for people of all walks of life to find comfort. She is not only a savvy, intelligent, and a dynamic business woman, but she is a constant source of support and encouragement to her staff and customers alike. It is by no mistake that over the course of 29 years, countless customers have become dear friends and our Ambrosia Family continues to grow. It is because of everything that my mother does, every decision she makes, every stance that she takes is out of love and light as she continues to give in the most selfless ways. Through my father's private battle



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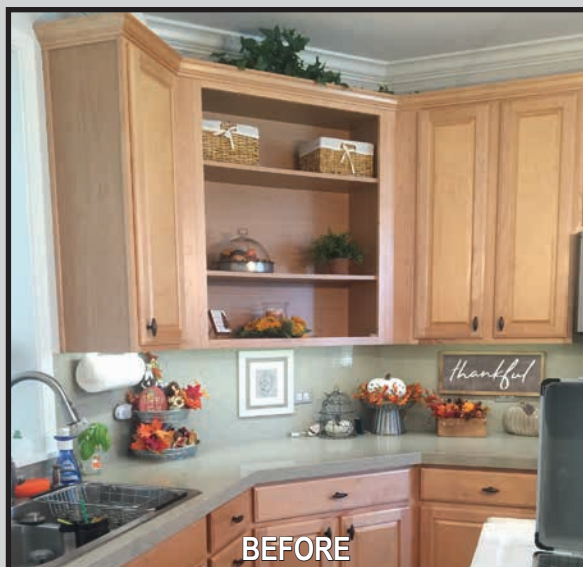
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with cancer and since his passing, my mother has continued to carry Ambrosia on in his honor. No one will ever truly know the inconceivable amount of responsibility she has assumed without pause and hesitation. I know I am not alone in believing that the ripples of her impact are deeply felt not only by those closest to her, but also by families, friends, strangers, and loved ones who gather around a table because of Ambrosia to share in conversation, celebration, and ceremony.

Kate Haleblan, FORMER EMPLOYEE

When I started working at Ambrosia at age 17, Deb became a mentor of mine. Aside from my mom, I had never been in the presence of such a hardworking, driven, and tenacious woman. She was beautifully equal parts strict and understanding, which are two very important leadership skills to balance and many do not do it with the amount of ease that she does.

Aside from Debby being an outstanding mentor and light in my life during my formative teenage years, she was an unwavering member of my support system when I went through chemotherapy at age 18. In fact, my parents would call Deb the “Kate whisperer” as she is the only person whose voice and touch I would respond to when I was in a nearly two-week long coma. She would travel daily to check in on my family and I with of course the most delicious pastries in hand. I would not be the woman I am today if I had never met Deb. I can only hope to become half the woman she is!

Beth Keleske, FRIEND

My dear friend Debby and I met at Mankato State University in Minnesota. I always thought it fortuitous in my life that we ended up living in the same community as we both started having our own families. This was when she and Richard started Ambrosia Patisserie in Fox River Grove. I worked at both Ambrosia locations of Fox River Grove and Barrington. I stopped working in the Barrington location when I was pregnant with my daughter Lizzy. Sixteen years later she worked at Ambrosia also and loved it! Debby has the strongest work ethic of anyone I know. I saw first-hand how hard she and Richard worked to establish Ambrosia while raising a family. The other stand-out characteristic of Debby is her being so open-minded.

Craig S. Krandel, FRIEND

My wife, Jaci, and I met Debby and Richard over 20 years ago when they operated Ambrosia out of a small storefront in Fox River Grove. To say it has been “sweetness” from then on, would be a serious understatement. Debby’s positive attitude, smile, energy, and caring attitude are shared with every person who connects with her each day. We consider Debby one of our dearest friends, and one of the hardest-working people we have ever met. Debby is steadfast in her beliefs and while she may not agree with the other person, always remains respectful in her attitudes and dealings with that person, a trait that serves her well, and one we all should strive to follow,

Michelle Lesley, SISTER

I am writing this from a pilgrimage in Spain, but feel so strongly about



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replying that I had to respond. Debby is a rare find of a person. She demonstrates this every day of her life, never skipping a beat! She treats everyone with sincere respect no matter who they are. Debby is a strong advocate for human rights for peoples throughout the world. Her ongoing support of Amnesty International is one example. Debby is a fantastic businesswoman, having built Ambrosia into a Barrington community staple along with her husband, Richard. She has the patience of a saint!

Martin Masters, FORMER COLLEAGUE

I've known Debby for 40 years. She and her parents worked at The Barn with my mom which is how I first met her, then our paths have crossed repeatedly. We both found each other working at a radio station downtown in Chicago, next I discovered she lived a mile away from me on the river in Cary, where we had many fun-filled gatherings. When Ambrosia opened, many a time she would have a care package ready for me to take to work as I drove past at 4 a.m., well before their opening hours. When I moved to California, she made sure I still got the occasional box of treats and coffee, and when I have returned to sweet home Chicago, we always make sure we get together to create more memories of good friendship.

Ann Stroncek, FRIEND

I am a Debaholic. This incredible person fills my heart with so much happiness and I always crave the time we get to spend together. Our story started at college in Mankato, Minn. We bonded over our mutual love of nature,

music, but most of all, good humor. Throw in a few donuts and a road trip and we were the happiest of campers. If there is one word that could describe Deb, it would be love. It shows so magically in everything she does and everyone she meets. Deb has a peaceful, compassionate spirit and you are drawn to her energy and determination to bring out the best in humankind. I cherish her, my very best friend!

Marlene Rucks, OWNER NIRVANA YOGA

People come to yoga to be stronger or more flexible, or just a better human being. Debby walked in already that. We became friends. Family, food, music, concerts and our book group, which we are still on our first book. This woman has skills! She manages Ambrosia in a way that looks effortless, and yet it rises to the top of all other bakeries. I have also seen her lose her best friend, Chef Richard. When someone we love dies, our lives are broken and will never be the same. I don't know anyone other than Deb who could make these things feel true and beautiful at one and the same time. I think we all want to do great and beautiful things. Life can be hard. It needs beauty. We have been given Debby. U

Publisher's Note: Quintessential People™ is a heartfelt collaboration between our publication and portrait artist Thomas Balsamo. Our goal is to share exceptional images and words that ring true about some of the finest, most inspiring people in our community. For more information, contact QB at publisher@qbarrington.com, or Thomas Balsamo (Portraits By Thomas) at 847-381-7710, or visit www.portraitsbythomas.com.