

SPECTATOR

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THE MEANING OF LIFE

by Stacey Gresell

When my daughter was just a tiny thing, barely walking, we were out in the yard exploring... at least that's the way it is remembered in my perfect parent mind. Truth is I was weeding and glancing every so often to make sure she didn't eat a bug. That's when a perfectly innocent toad hopped by.

I'll never forget her expression.

She laughed and laughed as if it was the funniest thing a human being had ever laid witness to; one of those baby belly guffaws that makes your own eyes water. She waddled behind that poor frog forever just busting a gut every time he hopped. Still makes me smile because of her pure joy, her discovery and wonder.

We probably all have stories like that, but if your kids are entering high school those stories are getting dusty. If your children are small still, then dustier folk like me are telling you to cherish those moments. You say "Of course!" but you won't really understand until they happen to you again.

Those moments of wonder and discovery happened to us again last fall in a fairly unique way. We got a new daughter. We picked ours up from the airport with signs and fanfare. I still remember her polite smiles in the backseat as she got bombarded with ridiculous questions- "You're from Italy? Did you live in the heel or the toe? Do you eat pasta every day? Do you have a car?"

You may wonder as I did once, why would anyone do this? Why would anyone add to the chaos of their life by adopting a foreign exchange student for a year?

There are a lot of lofty answers like...you can learn another language. We didn't. You will gain an expanded view on international perspectives. Nope. You will have a greater focus on life and academics.

I had 3 kids. I was drowning in life and academics already. So why?

My answer might surprise you. I wanted to be a good mom again.

We always put on the very best sides of ourselves for... others. Not our family. We are the kindest, most patient, most gracious and giving for friends and acquaintances and save the tale of our bad day, our cruddy mood and exhaustion for the people who supposedly mean the most

to us. In front of our own mother we are super mom but the minute she leaves we are begging a dirty child to take a bath and bribing them with candy if they'll do it without crying—you know you've done it.

Every parent worries about their kids and about being a good parent but it's hard. It's even harder when you both work. It's even harder when you have no family nearby. It's even harder when...

I could continue but I'm sure you know as well as I do that the

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excuse train could ride the rails for a while.

I needed to resurrect the patient, funny and sweet mom who was always willing to hold your toad while you went potty. I wanted some version of that mom to come back.

Chiara brought her back. Chiara made me snuggly on the couch again. Chiara made me review English papers again. Chiara made me laugh and roll my eyes with a smile on my face. She made me think about my rules and the rationale for them; and reminded me of the importance of explaining them. Chiara was the kind of kid who would come downstairs, see me making dinner and just slide in gently beside me and start chopping garlic. She'd tell me about her day and ask about mine with genuine interest. It was only then that I realized I hadn't been doing these kinds of things with my own kids very often, not really.

I had gotten tired and allowed myself to check out way too often. But with unfamiliar eyes on me, I dug a little deeper to the better mom that was always still there but had become complacent.

Having a foreign exchange student living in your home will certainly mean a lot of those lofty things. You will learn more about incredible places, taste wonderful food, and witness discovery and wonder again through a child's eyes. But you might also find that dusty side of yourself, try it back on and live it again.

I have 4 kids: 3 that I made and 1 who remade me.



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A Star Among Us

by Jackie Devine



Do you recognize this lady? Well, if you've listened to drive time news, picked up a newspaper, flipped on the TV, or checked out her Facebook feed during Houston's world-renowned Wine and Food Week, you know she is a significant part of the wine and foodie scene.

Be that as it may—expertise and star quality aside—Rachel Lewis has a number of other impressive claims to fame. She is the proud mother of three outstanding sons, Oliver 12, Sawyer 9, and Samuel 7, runs a 21st Century, cutting-edge social media marketing firm, and last, but not least, she lives in the hood—our Fairfield neighborhood that is!

Rachel and I met at Ault Elementary on the last day of school waiting to usher in our respective end of the year parties. I listened as she was explaining to the gentleman across from me her involvement

in the hospitality event circuit and her recent participation in Houston's Wine and Food Week festivities.

On the spot, I asked for an interview. Elegant and sophisticated, yet kind and gracious, she accepted my request.

Visionary Rachel Lewis is the owner and operator of Hometown Social, a five-year-old digital marketing and PR firm that focuses on the hospitality industry and targets the restaurant and food scene.

"Although I include digital marketing, advertising, graphics and connection with a variety of media platforms in my services rendered, the majority of my business is social media marketing and reputation management, namely through Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Yelp, Trip Advisor, Google and a variety of other similar platforms," she explained. "I've spent years studying and analyzing the evolving science behind the point of sales systems, loyalty programs, and working with algorithms to guide every decision I make on behalf of my clients so that I can leverage their marketing dollar and move seats in their restaurants.

"For example," she adds, "when I sign on a new client, I take two weeks to analyze, investigate and research their activity. I look

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at their standing in the community, and not only what's working and what's not, but also what makes sense going forward. Then, I develop a strategy in line with their business objectives targeted to increasing influence and maximize brand exposure."

Listening to Rachel, it became apparent that relationships are at the core of everything she does. Her connections are vital to producing effective communication between the media and publicists---each feeding upon the other. She says, "The media needs publicists for their stories, and we need them to write about our clients."

I asked her how she attracted business. She replied, "The reasons are numerous, but the major one is they need marketing support but don't require a person full-time in-house. Companies are beginning to contract out those services rather than hire someone to work a 40-hour week."

"Then, there are other times I'm called in because a company is in trouble. I'm always eager to help, but at the same time, I'm cautious about not overpromising and underdelivering," she commented. "If a restaurant calls me for a Hail Mary, in a last-ditch attempt to stay afloat, I'm going to do everything I can to help, but I never promise to have a silver bullet."

Reputation management and monitoring notifications have become a significant part of the marketing strategy she offers to clients. Whether they are smaller restaurant groups like her Cypress clients or more massive conglomerates that have a national presence, they recognize that reviews can be critical, even make or break their business.

Beaming, Rachel smiled, "One of the favorite parts of my job, is the event circuit. I especially enjoy Wine and Food Week, which offers ten events over the course of seven days, attracting chefs and wines from all over the world. It offers something for everyone, whether they are brand new to the wine world, or a connoisseur looking to grow their cellar or collection."

"I work with the media Fox 26, KHOU, Click2Houston, Houston Life, Great Day Houston, pretty much all of the local stations. Typically, I bring in a chef or a sommelier, and we'll talk about the dish that they are preparing. This year, Wine and Food Week's Master Sommelier was one of the only 215 Master Somms in the whole world. And the only one in Houston."

"Another area of fulfillment is my involvement with the charities tied to significant events that I represent. For example, New Danville—a



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self-sustaining, master-planned, integrated community where adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities live, learn, work, and grow—is the beneficiary of Wine and Food Week. Incredibly, residents operate their own farm, manage beehives, and make soap, which gives the adults the ability to live to their full potential.

“This last year, local event Katy Sip and Stroll focused on the Ballard House, which similar to the Ronald McDonald House, offers free housing to patients and caregivers coming to the Katy area for the treatment of life-threatening illnesses.

Rachel also handles the media and website for the Ballard House. “It’s the most incredible place,” she added. “If you are looking for a charity to work with, look at the Ballard House. It’s 20 minutes south on Hwy. 99.”

“Honestly, I feel it is a profound honor to work with all the charities I represent,” she explained with sincerity. “I have always believed that whatever you do, whether it’s teaching, practicing medicine, or working at Starbucks, you can find purpose in connecting with people—getting outside your own circumstances and helping others always enriches our lives.”

As we neared the end of our interview, I asked my time-honored question, “Tell me what you’ve learned from life, what do you know for sure?”

Sighing deeply, she said, “I know for sure that community happens when you break bread and drink wine with people. Sitting down

with someone, putting the world aside, sharing a meal and having a drink, help you connect in a way that you weren’t connected before.”

No doubt, Rachel had the right idea. According to the National Restaurant Association, millennials, although more likely than any other age group to use restaurant-related technology options are not the only demographic group to show interest in doing so. A significant proportion of consumers in the baby boomer generation are also using computers and smartphones when interacting with restaurants.



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ON THE FARM DAY

Submitted by Stephanie Baker

Nature Discovery Camp occurred June 25-29. On Tuesday we had our "On the Farm" day! Campers planted cucumbers and dill seeds to take home. Then they used organic cucumbers and fresh dill to make their own jar of refrigerator pickles. Keith student Nolan Maxian was excited about his jar of pickles!

We also had a three guest speakers because FFA high school students visited with our campers and talked to us about their animals.

Emily Dennison brought her sweet goat Tripp to camp. She is the daughter of Tracey Dennison, a second grade teacher at Swenke.

Molly Covey, a student at Keith, enjoyed petting a bunny on the same day. All the students loved their day at the farm during the Nature Discovery Day!

Ready to Grow Gardens is owned and operated by Stephanie Baker in Cypress, Texas. Stephanie earned her Texas Master Gardener Certification from the Texas Cooperative Extension and Harris County Master Gardener Association in June of 2003.





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