

ARCHIVE



Learning to fly

Early in her career, Monika Schnarre modelled back-to-school clothes. But going back to school wasn't so easy. **Jessica Dee Humphreys** takes notes

Monika Schnarre wore her own sweater from Le Château, black wool pants from the men's department and Esprit espadrilles.

ERIN COMBS
TORONTO STAR
FILE PHOTO

As she catapulted to worldwide fame, teen sensation Monika Schnarre modelled back-to-school fashions for Star photographer Erin Combs. The Scarborough native doesn't remember much about her first day of high school, since it was eclipsed by her winning Ford Models' "Supermodel of the World" contest in Los Angeles a few days later. "However," she says, "the first day back after winning the contest (Sept. 13, 1986) was crazy. The entire cafeteria stopped and looked at me. I turned on my heels and, moving forward, didn't spend too much more time at high school."

While many of her classmates were intrigued by the glamour and excitement of her new life, Schnarre knew the reality had its downsides. "The constant travel and keeping up with studying were very taxing on my nerves," she says.

Schnarre's work ethic served her well through those years. Before she was old enough for a driver's licence, she had appeared in the "Sports Illustrated" swimsuit edition and on the cover of "Vogue." "I was proud to graduate with honours," says Schnarre, "even though I missed about half of high school."

Reflecting on changes in the modelling world, Schnarre says, "It is refreshing to see diversity. Beyond Naomi (Campbell), Beverly Johnson and Iman, there was little diversity in the modelling industry when I was working." However, she acknowledges that problems still exist. "While there have been great strides with inclusion," she says, "nowadays there is an unrealistic standard of beauty (because of Photoshop and retouching), and so much nepotism. How does any model make it without famous parents?"

Schnarre continues to thrive beyond modelling. She has acted in movies and on television, launched an anti-aging skin-care line, renovated houses and serves as an ambassador for the Habitat for Humanity's Women Build program. This beauty clearly runs deep.

SPECIAL TO THE STAR

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RABBI
AARON LEVY

When the pandemic hit, Rabbi Aaron Levy biked around the city in search of an outdoor space to hold Friday night service.

STEVE RUSSELL
TORONTO STAR

CHANGEMAKER



Answered prayers

Rabbi Aaron Levy started Makom to merge progressive and traditional values. But, he tells **Ethan Rotberg**, holding services hasn't been easy

When the pandemic started shutting down the city during the spring of 2020, Rabbi Aaron Levy began to worry. Like everybody, he was concerned about the virus. But as the founding rabbi and executive director of Makom, a downtown Jewish community that fuses tradition with progressive values, Levy also worried about the pandemic's impact on a community that relies on in-person activity.

"There are some things that don't work as well online," he says. "Like praying together."

The 45-year-old rabbi was born in the U.S., eventually landing a gig as a campus rabbi at Hillel at the University of Toronto, an organization for Jewish students. Levy and his partner, Miriam Kramer, viewed it as a one- or two-year exploration of a new city and country. Fifteen years in, the couple, now with two sons, are still in love with Toronto.

He founded Makom (Hebrew for "place") in 2009 after seeing that so many downtown-dwelling Jews didn't have a community with which they felt connected. "We welcome Jews of all stripes and flavours. And non-Jews as well," he says. "We're a community where everyone is welcome, all ages, gender identities and sexual orientations."

Since its inception, Makom has been accustomed to finding creative solutions to meeting in person. During the community's early years, without a permanent space, Makom would convene in a variety of locations, including artists' studios, community centres, a historic downtown synagogue, even living rooms and backyards.

As part of its revival of downtown Jewish life in Toronto, Makom began operating out of a storefront on College Street. Then, suddenly, it was gathering virtually.

"We had online services, but it's just not great," Levy admits. "Especially because the vibe of our service is all about everybody singing together."

As the weather improved, Levy explored ways to bring his community back together, safely. At the time, there were still limits on gathering in a public park.

"I was just biking around, keeping an eye out for a reasonably large outdoor space that wasn't on city property," he says. When he noticed a lovely yard next

to St. Peter's Church on Bathurst Street, he called Father Michael McGourty and asked if it was possible for the synagogue community to pray outside. The priest "loved the idea," and by July 2020, Makom was holding their regular Friday night services outside of the church.

Another detour in 2020 came during the High Holidays in September. With guidelines now allowing for park gatherings, Makom settled on Christie Pits, where a picnic shelter could shield congregants from the elements.

"The High Holidays fell on weekends for the most part," Levy says, "so the park was really hopping." Praying in the park made for some strange juxtapositions, especially during the more solemn services.

"There were times where we would be next to people playing soccer, or people with a boombox," Levy says. "There was a dance, and a yoga class right next to us. You just kind of roll with it, you just have to smile."

In the year since, the mobile congregation has continued holding services outdoors, while utilizing its coffee-shop-sized College Street location for other programs, including charitable drives.

Since January, Food Not Bombs, an organization providing food for people experiencing food insecurity or homelessness, has used the storefront to stockpile large quantities of donated groceries and as a workspace for volunteers. Makom also recently hosted a vaccination clinic for clients of Fort York Food Bank.

The community is now preparing for the second year of pandemic High Holidays, its current location still unable to hold social-distanced services.

Though Makom will only share the meeting place with those who register (for reasons of safety), Levy says the roving community will be back outdoors, though this time opting for or a more tranquil environment than Christie Pits.

And while he's anxious to return to in-person programming, Levy confesses it feels organic to hold services outdoors.

"Some of the prayers that we sing on Friday nights are about seeing God's majesty in the natural world," he says. "Where better to sing those than in nature?"

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