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# Niskayuna NEIGHBORS



Rachel  
Gershon  
Rourke

*A Lifelong  
Educator  
& Learner*



## RESIDENT FEATURE

BY JENNA CAPUTO | PHOTOS BY MIA ERTAS PHOTOGRAPHY & CONTRIBUTED BY THE ROURKE FAMILY

# Rachel Gershon Rourke

## *A Lifelong Educator & Learner*



When Rachel Gershon Rourke decided in third grade to become a teacher, she never thought about how much of an impact it would have on her own life. She just knew she wanted to allow her students the freedom to walk around, talk with their friends, and be their full selves while she sat in a rocking chair and read stories to them. Of course, this was before she knew about teacher contracts, state testing, and teacher evaluations. But her goal of allowing others to be their best, full selves has never changed.



A fourth generation Schenectady native, Rachel's younger years were filled with memories of joining her best friend's family for a couple weeks every August at Sacandaga Lake, playing Barbies, jumping off the dock, catching frogs, eating sandy smores, and watching the magical fireflies. At the time, Rachel majored in "hallway sitting" in school. She wasn't good at sitting still and had a hard time with the "everyone sit at your desk and follow along with the teacher" teaching model. She wanted to talk to her classmates, and she knew she wanted to be smart just like her teacher. So when the teacher handed them all manilla folders and said to draw what they wanted to be when they grew up, Rachel knew exactly what she would draw. Her goal to be "A GOOD TEACHER" followed her from that day forward and influenced all her decisions. In the meantime, she enjoyed roller skating at Roll-a-Rama during her high school years, playing setter for the volleyball team, and working at Carver Community Summer Camp and Carl Co.

She met her future husband, Jay Rourke, in the ninth grade. "We had study hall at the end of the day together. He would ask my advice about his then 'girlfriend.' We were just friends. He broke up with her over the summer, unknown to me. Then in tenth grade, we had all the same classes, and he would stare at me from across the room since my last name began with G and his an R. Then he bought me a rose for the football game, and the rest is history! He spoiled me by carrying my books home every day after school, being my biggest fan at my volleyball games, being my study partner and my best friend." But Rachel was laser-focused on becoming a teacher, so when Jay told her he loved her when they were 16 years old, she replied with a "thank you."

Rachel went on to receive her BA from the College of St. Rose with a double major in Elementary Education and Secondary English. She received her master's from Antioch New England Graduate School, and is NYS permanently certified for teaching Nursery School to Superintendent. She is also SSI Scuba Certified. Unfortunately, Rachel was devastated to not get a teaching job right out of college. "I had won the Education Award from the College of St. Rose and thought I had a golden ticket. But little did I know what a profound effect Girls, Inc. would have on me and my practice as an educator," she says.

Rachel began her career at Girls Incorporated of Schenectady as the "Kids Corner" teacher in an afterschool program. "Here I took a deeper dive into how girls learn differently, understanding and respecting other life experiences than my own, how to write grants, how to look for win-win partnerships with other community groups, but mostly how to fall and get up again realizing the fall was detrimental to my own learning," she explains. After five years there, Rachel wanted to get back to the school system and knocked on every "door" she could until she landed a kindergarten teacher position at Lincoln Elementary—her father's alma



mater—right when kindergarten was transitioning into full day and had learning expectations of first grade. "However, I knew the commitment I made to myself in third grade, and this would be the kind of classroom where everyone was cherished for who they were and nurtured to be their best selves," she says. "It was hard work balancing the state and district expectations and that of real live four- and five-year-olds. The success was simply to personally reach out to families, create connections, listen, listen, and listen."

It worked. Rachel connected with her students, and over the years, has had many of her kindergartners reach out to invite her to their graduations or to let her know they entered the

military, went to college, became a pediatrician, a tattoo artist, an attorney, a mom...she even has been invited to a Zoom destination wedding. "This is the priceless and most precious privilege of being an educator—I never saw it coming!" she says.

Eventually, Rachel wanted to take a deeper dive into education to improve her practice. She came across the America Achieves National Fellowship, applied, and was accepted into the second cohort. A cohort was made up of two people from each state and included a cross section blend of everything in the education field, including librarians, counselors, administrators, and teachers from both parochial and charter schools. "We were treated like rock stars!" she says. They had to choose one out of three options to explore during the two-year fellowship. In typical Rachel fashion, she chose all three. To fulfill these goals, Rachel co-created the "Bring your Legislators to School Day in New York State" program; led workshops for teachers, parents, and community members in understanding "What the Common Core Is and Is Not and Why It Is Important to You and Your Child"; and she created a Common Core-Aligned Aviation Camp for grades 3-12 for The Empire State Aerosciences Museum, partnering with The 109<sup>th</sup> Air National Guard and The Experimental Aircraft Association, ensuring each camper received a free flight.

Over the years, Rachel has also won the Educational Scholarship The College of St. Rose's Institute for New Era Educational Leadership and Innovation, the National Belin Award Honor for internationally published curriculum, the YWCA Today's Woman Award, and she became a B'Nai mitzvah at 40 years old—one of the most challenging tasks of all. While these were all great achievements, Rachel's proudest accomplishments are "when something I've taught or shared is then used to make the world a better place. For example, when my fifth grade class worked with Yates Neighborhood Association to apply, receive a grant, and install playground equipment for older, larger-sized children; attending my elementary students' high school graduations; all my work with America Achieves challenging, pushing, and supporting me; an article I wrote on Common Core on the ELA Classroom published in the *New York Post*; and Aviation Campers becoming pilots."

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Rachel now fulfills the position of Community Volunteer Coordinator for Jewish Family Services, the Jewish Federation, and the Albany and Schenectady Jewish Community Centers—a combined role that allows her to make an impact on the community and allow others the satisfaction and joy that comes from volunteering. "What I didn't know and learned was that all our volunteers really are extended family lifelines, or as one recipient remarked, 'volunteers are really life-savers,'" she says. "Many children do not live where their parents do and our volunteers are that lifeline to check in and make sure all is well with their parents, grandparents, and even aunts and uncles. Volunteers are truly the heart of any neighborhood."



Rachel also volunteers herself, sharing her love of gardening, serving as Director of Volunteers for the Freihofer's Run for Women, Co-chair with Jay for Niska Day, Chair of the Niskayuna Women's Tennis Event, the Neighborhood Block Party and unofficial Godfrey-Lane-welcome-to-our-street person, and she works with Allies for Justice Schenectady County to help asylum seekers.

Rachel and Jay eventually married and continued to call this area their home. Jay is now the CIO at SUNY Construction Fund and loves to bake and travel. The two always loved children and had plenty of room in their hearts and home to share. After five years of marriage, they decided to participate with foreign exchange and respite fostering—a program set up to allow the same children to come and stay on weekends, vacation breaks, and summers. They now have four daughters and two foster grandsons: Melissa Patneau (44) is now a sixth-grade teacher at Shalom; Andrew Patneau (9) loves baseball and The Red Sox; Alex Patneau (6) loves everything his big brother does; Macaela Garcia (27) now a Logistics Manager and loves all kinds of dogs, crocheting, and trying new recipes; Torey Garcia (34), an IT Manager, and enjoys playing video games and listening to audio books; Theresa Simmons (28), now a high school English Department Chair and teacher in NYC; and Arusyak Poghosyan (27), who just received her Attorney License from Armenia. Their family also includes three dogs: Moshe, a Havanese who is the "nana dog"; Malorie, originally a foster Havanese who they ended up keeping; and Murphy, a silky terrier rescue from the Bronx. Rachel enjoys training the dogs and is working toward all three graduating as Canine Good Citizens. She loves everything family and trying new things in her spare time, along with snorkeling, reading, learning about other cultures, playing tennis, gardening, axe-throwing, and hosting holiday celebrations.





*while making the world—no matter how small my part is—a better place for the next person.”*

While the kids were in school, Rachel and Jay always made themselves available for any extracurricular activities or parent events. They also created an English Cottage Style Free Little Library in their front yard for the community to use. It has become a special meeting place. “We especially love seeing the pile of bikes stacked on the lawn with a myriad of kids reading books,” says Rachel. “We know during COVID it really became a special place for neighbors to have access to books, and a bench when one of our neighbors was going through physical rehab. We even see our utility person stop and swap out books.”

And that’s not all they do for the community. Jay and Rachel also make “crazy cakes” for their family and friends. It started as a hobby for Rachel when Macaela was one. She experimented with different baking mediums to complete the three-dimensional cakes. Jay became involved when her hands gave out and she needed help squeezing the frosting and supporting the structures. The cakes are all nut and tree nut free. And the funny part is Rachel doesn’t even like cake, so she never eats a slice! These fun, 3D cakes for all occasions provide an exciting surprise for their recipients. Rachel is also working with Folklore, NY to write a book about the history of Gershon’s Deli—a cornerstone of the Schenectady community. And yes, Rachel is related to the Gershon family, the original owners of the deli. It’s a question she gets from people all over the US, and she’s excited to share the history of this special place in the community.



Their family loves to travel and have so far been to many places all over the world, and they also take yearly extended vacations to Cape Cod. They have many other places on their bucket list that they’re hoping to get to as well. When home here in the Capital District, they love to attend many of the local events like Niska Day, 4<sup>th</sup> of July at Mabee Farm, SPAC, Jumpin’ Jacks, Scotia Cinema, the Writer’s Institute series at SUNY, Farmers Markets, Snowshoeing, and many others!

Rachel is a lifelong learner who always sets new goals for herself. She loves to learn other people’s stories, has boundless energy, and constantly strives to do better. She urges everyone to go out and get to know all their neighbors. As she always says, “They are friends you haven’t met yet!” She wishes for an inclusive, nurturing, and safe haven atmosphere for all children to learn, study, and question so they can become tomorrow’s movers and shakers of the world. In the meantime, she’s doing her best to make her corner of the world just a little bit better. “I have always had this strong sense that I must give life my all while making the world—no matter how small my part is—a better place for the next person.” ∞

***Interested in volunteering?***

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