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## MY NAME IS LOLA

by Lola Rozsa,  
as told to and written by Susie Sparks

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## “Somethin’ Might Be Gainin’ on Ya.”

Wheelchair bound or not, life carried on, but at this stage I’m afraid it’s one step forward and more than a few back. At one point, when our great-granddaughter, Emma, was a toddler much attached to her favourite doll, Ted and I were both hobbling about in a health care facility. Her mother brought Emma for a visit and insisted that Ted and I needed a brisk walk down the corridor to the visitors’ lounge. I couldn’t understand why the other visitors in the hallway were giggling at us until I turned around in my wheelchair and saw that Ted was behind me dutifully limping along with his walker, followed by Emma pushing her doll’s stroller. All we needed to make a parade was a marching band and a couple of Shriners in clown cars. Like I say, it ain’t for sissies and you need a sense of humour.

But the fact was, Ted was getting increasingly unsteady on his feet. It was harder for him to get around on his own, so we hired a driver to get us back and forth around the city because my eyesight was pretty poor by that time too. Paul Budgen became like a member of the family, always on deck to take Ted to the golf course, or pick up Mary Cristina from school, or deliver me to church on Sunday mornings. I hope he knows how very much he has sustained our quality of life for so many years.

However, when I fell and injured my back in the winter of 2004, the kids insisted that Ted move into an assisted-living accommodation while I was in the hospital recovering. I was assured that the staff doted on him, but I was also pretty sure he was missing access to his office. He had just completed the sale of Rozsa Petroleum, and I knew he'd want to be attending to the final details. Then, about a month later when I was released, the doctors advised the kids that we should both stay in the residence because, until I was more mobile, I would need some help. It wasn't a happy time for either of us, I'm afraid. Despite the excellent care and the lovely accommodations, we both missed our home and within a couple of weeks I asked our caregiver whether she would consider moving with us back to our home on Lake Bonaventure. She readily agreed, and Ted and I both heaved a sigh of relief the moment we drove up to the front door.

Others, I'm sure, thought we were crazy for leaving what was truly a lovely spot. But I'm afraid we both had too many irons in the fire to retire. The Philharmonic had created a spot on the board for the Rozsa family and the children were taking their turns as director, but Ted and I were continuing to stay closely involved in other ways. And since the Rozsa Foundation was actively encouraging strategic alliances between arts organizations, we were eager to see how the Philharmonic might work with other initiatives like the Calgary Opera and the Honens Piano Competition.

Since its inception in 1991, Ted had contributed quietly to the Esther Honens Competition, and we were inspired by its almost immediate international esteem. We of course had been familiar with the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition in Fort Worth, Texas, but so much of its reputation rests on the considerable talent of its very charismatic founder. We were concerned for that very reason that it might not be sustainable, so we watched with considerable interest as the Esther Honens competition developed.

Although born in Pittsburgh, Esther was raised in Calgary and she became a very good amateur pianist with a huge passion for music. In due course, she married and went to work as the office

manager for Birks Jewellers, where she stayed for twenty-five years. And happily, her husband, John Hillier, was a partner in a very successful plumbing and supply company, so she was able to invest much of her salary in real estate. After his death, she married Harold Honens, and together they assembled extensive real estate holdings and were able to help support both the Calgary Philharmonic and the Kiwanis Music Festival.

As she aged, though, Esther wanted to leave Calgary a legacy that would ensure its position at the centre of the world's musical stage. She wrote: "My vision is to identify the finest of today's pianists, to bring them to Calgary for a competition that will be held in the highest international esteem, and to create a legacy of musical excellence that can be enjoyed by Canadians for countless generations." In 1991, she pledged \$5 million toward launching the competition. Her vision immediately resonated with the people who could help her make it happen and, in 1992, five days before she died, she attended the first Honens International Piano Competition.

The competition is held every three years and attracts the very best young pianists from around the world. By 2012, fifty quarter-finalists were announced. The competition finals launch the concert careers of its three top winners through an artistic and career development program that is unmatched worldwide.

Esther should be proud. She was able to support her passion at all levels of the arts in Calgary, from the children's Kiwanis Music Festival to the professionals of the CPO. The competition named for her has brought our city and its music to the attention of international culture as aspiring concert pianists now recognize that opportunity resides in Calgary. They're flocking here in hope of gaining the recognition that will jump-start their careers. But this priceless gift has been offered not only to the generations of pianists who will benefit, it's also a gift of love to Calgary. To my mind, this is the kind of legacy we should all aspire to leave.

So, by the time Ted and I moved back home, we were both very interested in the jury selection for the 2004 Rozsa Foundation

Award. The second year, we received even more nominations, and Bob McPhee joined the selection jury. We saw his role on the jury as critical to the selection process, and we decided to ask that past award winners be available to serve in this role and to attend the presentation ceremonies in subsequent years. Their participation as past recipients of the award has added an element to the process that has resulted in further refining the award criteria.

In 2004, Anne Green, the founding director of WordFest, was awarded the second annual Rozsa Foundation Award for Excellence. Born in 1996, WordFest had been the brainchild of the collaborative efforts of the Banff Centre, the Calgary Public Library, Mount Royal University, and the Writers Guild of Alberta, all of whom were determined to create a Banff-Calgary International Writers Festival. It started with an A-List of fifty Canadian writers, including Margaret Atwood, Roch Carrier, Wayson Choy, Tomson Highway, Paul Quarrington and Sheri-D Wilson, and it continues as the premier literary event of the year. By 2004, WordFest was attracting world-renowned writers and had incorporated the Summit Salon, an exclusive writers' retreat hosted by the Banff Centre, which is scheduled to immediately follow WordFest.

When Anne received the Rozsa Award, she was able to access both the Centre for Non-Profit Management and the Haskayne School of Business. She wrote, "I have been working with the Centre for Non-Profit Management on refining an organizational design. This is a process that is a luxury, and we are finding it to be valuable in and of itself. It has already been very beneficial for my staff... The expertise of the Centre is a unique contribution in that it does not duplicate any expertise in that area within our Board or staff... With regards to the Haskayne Case Study, a marketing study is a perfect use of this element of the Award in that it is both a practical project with immediate useful information and one that has not diverted too much energy away from the essential aspects of running the organization."

Anne continued to build WordFest's reputation across Canada and over the years it has grown to attract more than 14,000 people to a six-day annual festival that features upwards of seventy writers. And like other award recipients, Anne built strategic alliances between the festival and other community initiatives like First Calgary Financial's youth education program, Book Rappart. Don't you *love* that name?

After sixteen years at its helm, Anne retired from WordFest. It is a tribute to her excellent leadership that it continues to thrive and that it is still regarded as a world-class and ground-breaking festival of the literary arts.

The foundation was off to an excellent start under Mary Lil's capable direction, but I could see that Ted needed help to wind up his business affairs, so I was relieved when young Ted announced that he and his family had decided to move back to Calgary. He had worked with his father and I was hopeful that, with his help, Ted could finally put Rozsa Petroleum to bed. They came back early in 2005 and we were delighted to be able to get to know eleven-year-old Charles. Mary Cristina, his thirteen-year-old cousin, was also a frequent visitor, and she often brought her flute along to play for her grandfather. I think the fact that he had been so busy when the older children were living at the lake made Ted appreciate this second crop of grandchildren even more. He finally had the time to enjoy them.

Ted was about to have his ninetieth birthday, and the family planned a big party at the Country Club. We invited everyone Ted had known over the years: our extended families, all the guys on his geophysical crews, his business colleagues, his golfing buddies, including those who'd helped organize the Doodlebug tournaments, people he had volunteered with in the arts organizations and at the Glenbow, those from the universities who'd made the Rozsa Centres a reality, the students who had received his scholarships, and the many, many friends with whom we had travelled this long journey. It's times like these when you realize how very rich your life has been and how blessed you are by the friendships you have

been offered. I think he was surprised by the flood of well-wishers because he knew he liked his solitude and he never saw himself as an extravert, so he tended to minimize his effect on the people he knew. He was annoyed that he was so unstable on his feet that he needed to be in a wheelchair for the occasion, but it certainly didn't get in the way of his enjoyment of the evening, and he managed to visit with everyone there. People knew that his hearing was failing, so they made a special effort to talk with him one-on-one, which made their visits even more meaningful to Ted. He said it was the best birthday he'd ever celebrated.

As we were all leaving, however, Terry and Anne Myles stopped to visit a moment with Ruth Ann, and Terry asked why her father was in the wheelchair. When she told them that Ted was stumbling quite frequently, Terry suggested bringing him in for a quick neurological checkup. We put that appointment on our to-do list, and promptly went back to all the excitement planned for the 2005 Rozsa Award.

More nominations than ever before came in over the transom that year, and the jury's task was getting more difficult because so many more organizations were being challenged to address their business practices. Finally, though, the jury's unanimous decision awarded the prize to Kathi Sundstrom, the general manager of Decidedly Jazz Danceworks. They agreed that her exceptional management skills had enabled DJD to become one of Canada's most innovative and successful dance companies. Kathi had proven herself as one of Alberta's most adept arts managers, taking DJD from a struggling founder-driven company ten years before, through a period of tremendous growth to become a mature and sustainable company.

Kathi had achieved operating surpluses and increased the company's operating budget by 237 per cent in ten years to \$2.6 million. By implementing effective marketing strategies, DJD had doubled paid attendance at their annual performances. Their audience was loyal and growing and building incredible community connections through its dance school.



Following the award ceremony, Kathi wrote, "Decidedly Jazz used the Rozsa Award funds toward our Customer Relations Management program. We were successful in refining our strategic marketing plan, making considerable and valuable investment in developing and building the capacity and core competency of our Marketing/Development staff, and gained immense insight through the research we conducted. On the consulting side, the expert legal opinion rendered has enabled us to deal with the changes to the Revenue Canada Act which directly affected our HR practices. I thank you personally and on behalf of Decidedly Jazz for what the Award has helped us to achieve."

Since the award, DJD has toured extensively from coast to coast and continues to create ground-breaking work in Calgary, which is still its home base. And like other award winners, DJD has also collaborated with other community arts organizations. In 2009, *Skyscraper* premiered as part of One Yellow Rabbit's High Performance Rodeo. It was a new site-specific work that took audiences on an interactive exploration through Calgary's historic Grain Exchange building.

In only three years, the Rozsa Award had reached three widely varied arts organizations: The Calgary Opera, WordFest, and Decidedly Jazz Danceworks. They challenged Ted and me to step out of our usual comfort zone where we had spent so many volunteer hours, and we were learning how the issues regarding funding affected all of those winning organizations – plus those that weren't so well managed – in very similar ways. There was no question that these three award recipients were exceptionally talented business managers and that they had built healthy and loyal audiences. But they had also put away funds for the inevitable rainy days when the economy would hit a downturn. There were too many enormously talented and creative people who failed simply because they couldn't ride out the lean years. But to our frustration, too many of them rejected the challenge to incorporate good business planning because they believed it was diametrically opposed to the artistic

mind. “Artists shouldn’t have to plan for profitability and positive cash flow,” they said. “They should do their art.”

I suppose that, in a sense, artists are entrepreneurs much like Ted was. They have faith in their creativity and the courage to act on it, confident that what they dream can come to fruition. Artists are willing to risk everything to ask the difficult questions, to make us think in new ways, to make us see what has never been visible before, to make us imagine what might be possible. “But in return,” they say, “the public should be willing to invest in our creativity because it’s creativity that advances the culture. Think of public investment in the arts as what research and development funding is to the sciences. Neither is expendable,” they say, “because without taking creative leaps of faith – through art or through science – society can’t progress.”

My only response is to agree but to suggest that no scientific researcher ever gets public *or* private funding without a solid business plan in place. Perhaps what artists have to consider is a creative team that involves both disciplines. Kathi Sundstrom, the business manager of Decidedly Jazz, very carefully built that team ensuring that the dancers who brought such creativity to their performances also invested their talent in the DJD Dance School. It was the student fees that increased their revenues and provided them a healthy surplus. It was their student dancers who then brought their friends and families that grew their loyal audience. And that surplus allowed them to take the risks that advanced their art.

The conversation with all of the nominees was so interesting and we were challenged by all of them to think differently about many things. I think Ted would agree that the foundation had given us an amazing opportunity to look at all the arts in new and creative ways and that at this stage of our lives it was a truly mind-expanding experience. But more than anything else, for me anyway, I loved hearing their stories. How had they discovered that passion to create? How did their families help to nurture their talent? Who were the teachers who recognized those talents and opened doors for them?

We were thoroughly enjoying ourselves and, aside from Ted's shaky footing, we felt pretty lucky.

That spring, little Evan announced that we had a new great-grandson. He had a new baby brother named Satchel. Ted and I both laughed, and delightedly agreed that his namesake, the baseball player, should be even more famous for his wisdom than he was for his fastball. At this stage of life, we certainly understood what Satchel Paige meant when he said, "*Never look back; somethin' might be gainin' on ya!*"

A few months later, we made an appointment with Terry Myles, as promised, and as he was examining Ted, it became pretty clear that he was concerned, not only about his falls, but also about a dropped foot and his slurred speech. He called in Dr. Zechondy to consult with him, and they arranged for Ted to have some further tests.

I remember thinking how fortunate we were to know Terry. He had been so kind to both of us through Ted's earlier surgery and seemed to have limitless time to explain what was happening, and indeed he was being equally thorough with us this time. So when he called a few weeks later, I wasn't at all alarmed that he asked us to come back in. However, when he sat us down to explain his diagnosis, I was dumbfounded. I had missed seeing the obvious.

Ted had Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis.

