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When life spun out of control, Karen Royer found creativity

By CLAUDIA FELDMAN
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Bud and Karen Royer met on the phone. Karen dialed a wrong number, Bud answered, and he was so friendly, so funny, she didn't want to hang up. The next day, Bud called Karen to make sure he hadn't hallucinated that sweet, sexy voice. Soon they were daily phone buddies. She had an early morning music class at the University of Texas at Austin. That fall of 1972, he was her wake-up caller. After six weeks of phone talk, they had their first date. By the end of it, they were engaged.

Many Houstonians know the Royers, both near 50 now, as the couple who changed the Round Top Cafe in Round Top from a fading, chicken-fried-steak kind of place to a destination restaurant for diners from Houston, College Station and Austin. But making money from the restaurant, which their children now run, never was the Royers' ultimate goal. Instead, the cafe has become a launching pad, sometimes a backdrop, for other ventures. Bud, a marketer, has gone into the mail-order pie business, an enterprise he shares with disabled friends at Camp For All in nearby Burton.

He also helps Karen in her new career as a psychologist and creativity expert. She helps mid-career baby boomers move from dead center, and she also helps employers find the employees of their dreams -- or at least those who will fit well into their organizations.

It's all about leaving a legacy, making a difference, helping others help themselves, Karen says. It's also about making changes, taking risks, daring to make mistakes, she says. For two people who grew up in the Hill Country and make Round Top their home, theirs is a quintessential Houston story.

The Royers married in 1973 and moved to the Bayou City in 1975. Those were the glory days in Houston, and Bud went to work for the restaurant that embodied the times. Lawyers, businessmen, politicians old and young couldn't find margaritas any sweeter or green sauce more addictive than Ninfa's on Navigation. It wasn't just the food or the drinks, though, that made the restaurant magical. Mama Ninfa Lorenzo and her children made it that way. And then there were waiters like Bud Royer. After six months there, he had 250 customers asking for him by name.

In 1981, Bud went to work as a contractor for a design consulting group. But his timing couldn't have been worse: Houston's economy was about to tank, and Bud eventually lost his job. Soon, the Royer family was depending on Karen's income as a piano teacher to make ends meet. Family finances got so tight that Bud, Karen and their four small kids dined mostly on eggs and potatoes. They were broke when friends in Round Top called and said they wanted to unload the cafe. At that time, 1987, Bud was checking out every job possibility, but didn't have gas money for the hour-and-a-half trip to Round Top. Then a friend lent the family a credit card. The anxious Round Top Cafe owners put \$200 in the till, shook hands with the Royers and ran.

In the next few years, Bud and Karen came to question their prize. The place was a wreck. Customers were so rude they had Karen, who worked the door, in tears. Finally she switched places with Bud, who cooked in the tiny, unair-conditioned kitchen. They worked from morning to night six days a week, the kids joined them on the weekends, and still they were barely paying their bills. To attract the locals, they lowered their prices, but the strategy didn't work. After a year, the Royers decided to go after city folks who enjoyed the drive in the country and the quaint atmosphere. They revamped the menu to get rid of traditional country fare and added pastas, fish and steak.

Just as they were getting the hang of things, Karen cratered. "I fell apart in 1988," Karen says. "If you don't know yourself, the silence in the country will just kill you. You can't go to the mall; you can't go to the movies; there are not a lot of people to talk to. We lived in the town of Round Top (now they live a few miles away in Shelby), there were a total of 80 people, and our kids were the only kids in town. I thought Round Top would be like living in the Houston suburbs, and it wasn't." In addition to her disappointment with rural living, Karen was dealing with unresolved issues from childhood. At her lowest point, she tried to kill herself.

That's when the whole picture, by necessity, changed. She found a therapist. Then she drastically cut her hours at the cafe and went back to school, first to nearby Blinn College, then to UT. In 1993, Karen had a huge graduation party at the cafe. She was trying to chart her next step when a loyal customer, a professor

at Texas A&M, told her about the creativity workshop that was about to start in Galveston. No way could she go to A&M -- her blood ran UT orange, she told William Nash in the department of educational psychology. Come take my creativity class, he repeated. Karen walked into the class and knew she had found her niche. Nash says Karen has been a wonderful student. She understands the relationship between creativity and mental health -- the former helps preserve the latter when people need to make changes and set new directions. "Karen has a great awareness of the talents that people have hidden, and she can help them free things up so they can change their lives at home and at work," Nash says. Hooked, Karen got her master's degree in educational psychology, specializing in creativity and intelligence, and hopes to finish her Ph.D. in the same subjects in the next year or two.

It's a crazy thing about the cafe, she muses. "As much as I dislike it -- it kills your body, it takes all your time -- it's brought us everything. Everything we have, every opportunity has come through the cafe."

These days, Karen and Bud hold creativity workshops both at the cafe and at home around the dining room table. Usually they don't talk about creativity, per se, but about ways to look at the issues and problems in clients' lives more creatively. The Royers also take their show on the road. They've visited area companies, including Compaq and Shell Oil, to help entire departments work through problems.

At National Terrazzo Tile & Marble Inc., Victor and Angela Longo invited the Royers to evaluate all the company's employees, including themselves. The Royers found that some people were well-suited to their jobs, others would do better in different assignments and the office was arranged poorly. The Longos made the suggested changes, remodeling the office and tweaking job descriptions. Angela, one employee who wound up with a different job, says the office functions better now. One tool Karen almost always uses with clients is a five-minute personality test. There are no right or wrong answers. But the test divides people into four rough categories -- dominant, conscientious, influential and steadfast. That information helps, for example, in configuring an office staff. It won't do to have five bosses and no worker bees -- or vice versa.

Karen also is a licensed graphologist, which means she analyzes handwriting to learn more about clients. In the early going, she says, she thought it was just hocus-pocus -- up there with astrology and palm reading. "But I was shocked as I got into it. It backs up, it confirms, what you learn from talking and from the personality tests. And sometimes it adds nuances."

The Royers live in a five-story metal house off a dirt road in the country. Their house is so full of collectibles, artwork, books and family treasures it would take a fleet of vans to move them.

The center of family life is the smallish dining room and table that almost fills the space. It's ample for the mostly grown family now, but Karen already is wondering how to expand when there are more in-laws and more grandchildren besides their precious one.

The various careers have been great, Karen says, but she and Bud always tried to put family first. The Royers' job involved some special challenges. The couple's third child, Todd, was born with a birth defect, neurofibromatosis, which causes the spontaneous growth of tumors, and in his case, speech problems, too. Still, he has waited tables in the cafe just like his siblings. Amid the chaos, he learned that he could make himself understood, that most people applaud heartfelt effort, that those who don't aren't worth much worry or concern.

He wrote in a first person essay a few years ago: "My family always has been there for me, behind me 100 percent, which helps me get through life. I am very glad our family is so close."

Karen stares out of the upper-story picture window, which looks into the branches of an enormous tree just a few feet away. She can visualize an addition built into the tree almost as clearly as she can see a tame squirrel scampering around in the branches.

Why not?

Karen can be contacted by email at: dreamer@poinrecom.net and to read more about Creativity and Karen's Creativity Workshops, Teambuilding, And Employee/New Hire Profiling go to www.royersroundtopcafe.com and checkout Karen's page along with the Creativity Café page.