

Ida Rolf's Sons Speak About Dr. Rolf and Her Work

Ida P. Rolf's two sons both spoke at the First Annual Fascia Research Congress, held in Boston in October 2007. The following articles are their prepared talks, which they have graciously shared with us. From them, we learn more about Ida P. Rolf as a person, how she came to create the work we know as Rolfing®, and what it was like to grow up under her tutelage.

A Brief Talk About Ida Rolf

By Alan Demmerle



Ida Rolf often said she would rather be remembered for her work than for her life story. Consequently there is little written biographic material about her. Let me offer you a brief picture of who she was, as painted by myself, her non-Rolfer son. Her view that the only thing that mattered was what she did had a few disadvantages. Nature abhors a vacuum, and thus people sometimes create stories or embellish tidbits of data that are known about her. I want to take this opportunity to sketch parts of her life, as I knew her, to put to rest some of the incorrect stories about her.

She was born in May 1896, an only child, and lived her early life in the Bronx, New York. Her father was a civil engineer who made his living building docks and piers on the East Coast. Her mother was one of six sisters, all of whom lived in New York City. Ida Rolf was educated in New York public schools, received a Bachelor's degree from Barnard College and earned a Ph.D. in biochemistry from Columbia University. At the age of twenty-five she married Walter Demmerle, a childhood and family friend. He was an electrical engineer who had graduated from Cooper Union in New York City. She kept her maiden name since she already had a Ph.D. with the name Rolf on it and had begun her career as a researcher at the Rockefeller Institute (now called The Rockefeller University). Organizations such as Johns Hopkins and the Rockefeller Institute were leading the way in the developing field of medical research. At this time, she lived in Greenwich Village, New York. When her parents died in 1928, they left her waterfront property in Stony Brook, Long Island, New York on which was a small summerhouse. She and her husband winterized and added to this

home, moved there, and started a family. My brother Richard was born in 1932 and became a Chiropractor and Rolfer. I was born in 1933 and became an electrical engineer and researcher.

Dr. Rolf was insatiably inquisitive. She ardently studied aspects of anatomy, physiology, psychology, philosophy, religion, yoga, general semantics, homeopathy, and even astrology. She slept relatively little, and my childhood recollections include her invariably reading some serious subject matter (never a novel) when I went to bed at night. She was invariably up before me every morning. She was first and foremost a curious and imaginative intellectual, with a passion to understand the world around her. She told me that my father once had fallen from a horse while they were on a honeymoon camping trip in the Canadian Rockies, and she then began wondering about the nature of sprained ankles and how to facilitate their healing. Perhaps this event stimulated her interest in the human body. *It is my observation that she uncovered the principles and techniques of structural integration as a result of an intellectual passion driven by curiosity and manifested by long hours of study and hard work.* Whenever she encountered a problem with herself or her family, it was her nature to seek a solution. She was always open to new ideas and was willing to try new methods on herself or her family.

She quit her job at the Rockefeller Institute and was a stay-at-home mom when my brother and I were born. She may have found living in Stony Brook — a bucolic, very small town at that time, which is fifty miles east of New York City — a bit isolated for someone with her intellectual interests. She befriended a blind osteopathic physi-

cian, Dr. Morrison, who lived and worked in Port Jefferson (about ten miles east of Stony Brook), and for several hours per day, once per week for several years, she would read and discuss scientific journals and texts with him. He was one of the very early osteopaths; I would guess he was born around 1870. Indeed, he had lived and worked in San Francisco during the famous earthquake and fire of 1906.

In 1939, Ida Rolf and family moved to Manhasset, Long Island, about twenty miles east of New York City. This move was motivated by the fact that my father, Walter Demmerle, who worked as a consulting engineer from his office on Wall Street, in New York City, had become weary of the two-hour commute from Stony Brook. In addition, it was reported that the Manhasset public schools were superior to the ones serving Stony Brook, and my brother and I were of school age. I would guess, though it was never said, that she felt the value of moving to a town of professionals and intellectuals in closer proximity to New York City, a place she always loved.

It was about that time, she was in her late forties, that her work toward the development of structural integration got a sharper focus. My brother and I were in school, and she had more opportunity to pursue her other interests.

In the spring of 1947, my father died of heart disease; my mother was fifty years old and he was fifty-three. My brother and I were fourteen and thirteen. She had no significant inheritance and little in the way of family support. She developed a clientele and continued to develop her work. In the meantime, she was as attentive and supportive as any parent could be of her

two teenage boys. She helped us identify an appropriate career path and gave each of us a college education. My mother was supportive, caring, loving, encouraging, unemotional, and nonjudgmental. She was there when we needed her and not there when we didn't need her.

Dr. Rolf had a few expressions that I especially remember her for. 1) "If you have nothing to say, say nothing," with its corollary "If you have nothing *good* to say, say nothing." She lived by this idea. Small talk was not her forte, and most importantly, she was not critical of others and she never maligned anyone. This is not to say that she was retiring. In fact, she was demanding of herself, her colleagues, and her students. 2) She often said that her accomplishments, whatever they were, came from "10% inspiration and 90% perspiration." Indeed she was a hard and tireless worker driven by curiosity and a dedication to understanding the human body.

Circa 1959, Dr. Rolf sold her two houses, one in Stony Brook and one in Manhasset, and moved to an apartment at Riverside Drive and 74th street New York City. She lived on the 14th floor on the west side of the building with a spectacular view of the Hudson River and the sunsets over New Jersey. She had a special attachment to sunlight, which flooded that apartment, and she enjoyed that living arrangement for about ten years. She then moved to Blackwood, a New Jersey suburb of Philadelphia, to live in the vicinity of my older brother Richard and his family. During these years she traveled a lot and spent considerable time in Europe and California, forever seeking development of her work and teaching others the principles and techniques of structural integration. She died in the spring of 1979, at the age of eighty-two, working to the very end. Her remains rest in the family plot in Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx, New York.

I would like to relate two events that demonstrate Ida Rolf's pluck and grit. The first event took place when she was forty-two years old and the hurricane of 1938 descended upon New England doing major damage to Long Island, Connecticut and Rhode Island. The September storm struck with no warning; long-range weather forecasts, satellite imagery and television were technologies that were still undeveloped. My father was at work in New York City as my mother, my brother, and I marveled at the fierceness of the storm, expecting the next falling tree to crash through the

middle of the house and onto our heads. These storms, in addition to the very high winds and rain, usually bring exceptionally high tides. In this case, the full-moon tide (spring tide), the diurnal tide, and the storm surge caused by the exceptionally low barometric pressure all coincided, prompting an uncommonly high tide in Long Island Sound. Boats broke away from their moorings consequent to these enormous tides and wind. My father's boat was moored in the harbor in front of the house when this tide and wind conspired to transport this small cabin cruiser into the old town of Stony Brook. The boat was smashing in store windows when a resident near these stores telephoned my mother with this news. In the height of this viscous wind and rainstorm, she went to the town, boarded the boat, started the engine (a major job under the circumstances) and piloted the boat back down the main street to the harbor. Courage, conviction and fortitude were elements of Ida Rolf's constitution.

The second event that I would like to use to demonstrate Ida Rolf's character took place when she was seventy-six years old, and living in a house on the edge of a cliff bordering the sea in Big Sur, California. Those of you who have been to Big Sur can readily appreciate the steepness and general character of these cliffs. In front of this house was the top of a switchback path leading down to the ocean's edge, a path that would intimidate a mountain goat, and even myself, a healthy, sure-footed thirty-nine-year-old at the time. However, it did not faze Ida Rolf, despite the fact that she was suffering some mobility limitations due to old age. A senior Rolfer and friend of hers, John Lodge, and she decided it would be interesting to go down the path to the surf — John to fish and she to cheer him on. I was visiting my mother for the weekend and was unwittingly recruited to accompany her down the cliff. My opposition made no dent in her determination. My worries about her slipping off the trail on the loose crumbling rocks didn't deter her. She declared she had lived a good life and if she slipped and fell it would be a worthy end. I was tuned into the problem that if she fell, there was no way to get her back up to the house. The path was unsuitable to carry someone. The trip down fortunately was without incident. When the time came to go back up all went well, though slow, for a while. About 80% of the way up, she declared she couldn't go on any further, and had to sit down. Her legs, she declared, had

given out. We waited for John to finish his unsuccessful tempting of the fish and get to where we waited. Together we would decide what to do if time alone could not cure the collapse of Ida Rolf's legs. John kneeled on those sharp stones of that crumbling path, worked on my mother's legs and back for fifteen or twenty minutes and produced a miracle as Rolfers sometimes do. Ida Rolf gathered herself up and plodded up the rest of the path to the house. She had done what she wanted to do; she had gotten down to the edge of the sea and returned. It was I who had suffered the anxiety and trepidation of that dangerous ascent. Her outlook on the dangers of that trip seemed to me cavalier. In retrospect, however, I see her attitude as just her desire to live in such a way as to get the most out of life. The risks those circumstances presented were worth it. It was a demonstration of her appreciation of the adventure of living to the fullest.

It has been my pleasure giving you this very brief sketch of Ida Rolf. I would recommend two other sources of reflections about Dr. Rolf. Certified Advanced Rolfer™ Sam Johnson in the *IASI Yearbook 2007* wrote a stimulating and well-documented article "Ida Rolf and the Two Paradigms", which documents some of her history and develops some ideas as to her journey and the evolution of structural integration. I have found the Johnson article well worth reading.¹ 2) There is a book, edited by Rosemary Feitis and Louis Schultz and put together by the Rolf Institute of Structural Integration® called *Remembering Ida Rolf*. It is comprised of stories and anecdotes about Dr. Rolf. If you have an interest in some of the experiences of many of the early Rolfers with Dr. Rolf, I recommend you look at this book.²

Perhaps someday someone will compile more complete biographical material about Ida Rolf. I imagine it will be a difficult job because the people who knew her are getting old, some are dead, and notes and letters concerning her personal life are scarce. Even so, documenting what she did will be the easy part. To report how she did it, and what motivated her is bound to be the product of the reporter's imagination. Myths are abundant, but they are a tricky foundation from which to build biography.

EDITOR'S NOTES

1. This article was reprinted in the June 2007 issue of *Structural Integration*.
2. Published in 1996 by the Rolf Institute