

Broad horizons

Getting in touch with nature is part of Rosie Walford's technique for helping people tap into what they're really looking for in life

ALL in all, I have a great life. Hell, no. I have a fantastic life. I have a stimulating job, a home I love, I am blessed to be surrounded by inspiring, fun, generous-spirited people... and yet every now and then I get a niggling feeling that there must be more to life than this. Sound familiar?

This year I decided it's time to explore that niggler. And so I find myself sitting on Rosie Walford's balcony, high above Waiheke's Palm Beach. Below, the blue waters of the Hauraki Gulf glisten in the sunlight, above, two hawks glide effortlessly on the gentle wind currents over the sunbaked grassy hills. We are drinking good strong coffee, nibbling on fresh fruit and in a deep discussion about personal values, what makes me tick, what's in my head, my heart, my wishes, my dreams...

Rosie is the sparkling blue-eyed mastermind behind The Big Stretch, a British-based company that uses the great outdoors to change and inspire the lives of people from all over the world. As she has explained to me it's not for the dysfunctional. It's for people who are successful in their lives but aren't feeling fulfilled. "We have a lot of professionals but it's not about career," she says. "Lawyers, doctors, mothers going back to work, people who come before retirement who are planning the last days of life, IT consultants, people who run small businesses... They're bright but they want something for themselves because they've poured all their energy into their work. They may be quite comfortable but feeling a lack of meaning, or a hollowness or jadedness about themselves."

The Big Stretch is about finding something that brings meaning, the feeling of being part of something bigger; it might be looking for meaning, for love, wanting to feel more passionate, more engaged...

Rosie's own career has been highly successful. In London she

worked in advertising as a planner doing strategy for top international accounts. Her work took her all around the world and she rose to the top very quickly. "It was a really interesting process. I was involved in strategy, connecting up people's real motivations: why do they care about what shampoo they buy, why do they need shiny hair, the deeper or higher motivation behind things."

"But I realised selling more cars or soap powder wasn't ultimately meaningful or purposeful for me. Fortunately, I was applying the same strategies to projects I was doing at the same time for different charities and campaigning organisations and I realised this was much more fulfilling."

"At the time I was involved with a very green charity which referred to the corporates as 'the baddies who're messing up the world, who just don't think...'. And because I had a foot in each camp — one day I'd be working in the green charity, the next day at Unilever, for example — I thought to myself, the people I know at Unilever aren't bad, they're just not connecting up with who they are and what they see in the world. So I thought that was an interesting gap. Lots of people in the business world are busy being business people, surrounded by other business people and they don't really take a bigger perspective or ask what really fits with their values. And that was constantly in the back of my mind."

In 2003 Rosie came to New Zealand to work with a "very disgruntled Swedish engineer who was stuck in his life", and on a trip to the Milford Sound she creatively turned the surrounding landscape into an analogy of the rut he was in. "As he jumped up and down with excitement, suddenly I did too. Being away and being in the landscape is the perfect place to step back and have a look at your part in the whole of things and nature — because it's evolved and evolved. Every pocket has an

analogue answer to every problem you're stuck on so it's also the most amazing place to do that kind of creative rethinking and reseeing of everything."

Inspired by her own breakthrough, Rosie returned to Britain and The Big Stretch began. She now has a team of coaches and a base high in the hills of Spain where groups of individuals who are ripe for change in their lives go for a week of exploration — both mentally and physically — and good food and wine.

For New Zealanders who can't make the trip to Spain, Rosie is offering one-day Stretches here on Waiheke. And what I am discovering as the day unfolds is how it is not, like so many other coaching sessions, about navel gazing and looking at issues from the past. It's about looking outwards and how one can move forward in a way that is positive and rewarding. I love this. It's empowering and by the end of the day I am brimming with optimism, excitement and all the possibilities that lie ahead, possibilities that I'd never considered being able to implement or do.

After our coffees, Rosie and I walk down to the beach where we sit under a tree and she gently stretches my thought patterns. What do I see happening in society, locally, globally? What do I care about? What frustrates me? If I had to choose one thing to champion what would it be?

Random thoughts and ideas come flowing out in a semi-cohesive train of thought: the impact of globalisation, homogenisation, the loss of cultural distinctions, the pressure on families and individuals to keep up with the Jones', the easy come-easy go attitude of modern society, the mindless waste...

With Rosie's poignant questioning and encouragement, the mental blockages I've been feeling for so long unfurl. Suddenly the possibilities for change within my world seem as endless as the



Rosie Walford is the founder of The Big Stretch, a life-coaching experience for successful people seeking purpose in their lives.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BARRON HARRIS

ocean that stretches out to the horizon in front of me. Sitting indoors would never have created this physical and mental space for growth.

"I take the lid off people's aspirations," explains Rosie with an air of both respect and wonder in her voice. "As children we don't have any trouble wishing; we want to be astronauts, we want to fly to the moon or we want to have a really big flower garden... and contradictions don't really exist when we want to have it all. So I remind people how to get back into that space. A lot of people kind of give up and think it's too late. Or think, starting from here, how am I ever going to get there? You actually need to suspend that for a bit in order to find out what would be a big stretch for you really around your life."

For the afternoon, we leave the beach behind and head to the Forest and Bird reserve behind Onetangi.

"The complexity of the bush is quite good when we're trying to pull out the middle of what stops us doing things or what's in the way or looking at the creepy crawly pay-offs we get by staying where we are now," says Rosie as she leads me down a track into the cool shade of a nikau grove. "A big, beautiful tree can help create a sense of stillness and releasing all that blather in our heads. The bush is good for letting go of things and letting ideas come."

"When you walk your brain goes into alpha state. We're normally in beta which is very fast brainwaves that allow us to multitask — park our car and revise our shopping list — but there's no room to access your subconscious and creative thoughts."

"If we slow down to the next brain state which is alpha state — what happens is a little bit of our brain called the reticula activating system opens up and that's why when you're walking or running or swimming or showering you suddenly remember stuff or realise things. So after a morning of throwing up a whole lot of thoughts and ideas, going for a walk gives your brain time to organise it or let the strands fall into tidy shape."

It's hungry work, all this thinking and great outdoors stuff, so we stop for a picnic lunch. As we munch away the ideas come thick and fast. Rosie brings an impressive set of skills to

STRETCH AND GROW

If any of these phrases ring true, then it's time to stretch a little!

- I know it's time to make a major decision, to make a significant positive shift.
- I want to make a difference. Yet I don't want to start at the bottom of a career ladder.
- I want to reinvent myself.
- I have an uncomfortable feeling my organisation is part of the problem.
- I want to use my influence for the greater good.
- I wonder what my purpose and passions are. Can I follow them without giving too much up?
- I want balance. I want adventure, more love in my life.
- Success seems to have a price. I have worked hard and achieved much. But somewhere along the way, my bigger hopes have been put aside.

the conversation — a savvy knowledge of how the business world operates and a holistic approach to what is needed to feel fulfilled. Rather than suggesting radically changing your life — although some people are inspired to throw in the job, go travelling, retrain — it's all about looking at the skills and position you have now and

building on that. We brainstorm practical ideas that I can't wait to put into action."

"It always ends up being incredibly high-spirited," laughs Rosie. "People arrive a bit pale and non-faced, wondering what on earth they've let themselves in for. It takes a lot of courage to do the Big Stretch; who knows what you're going to

find? Some people do have a lot of sadness, you know, about wasted years and things, while others are looking for meaning, for love, they want to feel more passionate about life, more engaged, happy excited, alive...

"If you're quite comfortable but feeling a lack of meaning or a hollowness or jadedness about yourself, then finding something that brings you meaning, or being part of something bigger, can bring a sense of fulfilment and that can be really joyful. By coming along you're aware something has to change so that's brave."

The day finishes at one of the highest points on the island which spreads out in front of us like a map of my journey. Like those hawks riding high on the thermals, my day of stretching has left me feeling free, light and with a sense that the world is mine for the making.

● Look out in next week's Viva for Rosie's new monthly column: Money Can't Buy It. To find out more about her rural retreats ph (09) 372 7096 or go to www.thebigstretch.com

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