

TORONTO

# waterfront

MAGAZINE

THE 2023

## *Waterfront* AWARDS

David Suzuki  
FIRES BACK

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AN INTIMATE CONVERSATION WITH

# Suzanne ROGERS

UNITING FASHION WITH PURPOSE.

# SUZANNE ROGERS

## *Uniting Fashion With Purpose*

**W**hen Suzanne's press agent confirmed the interview for this article would take place in Toronto at the home of Suzanne and Edward Rogers, I was excited. I was about to get a little sneak peek, behind the scenes of the Rogers empire. Who wouldn't be curious to see how one of the most affluent families in Canada lives.

The house had an extra large driveway area, and the outer perimeter of trees made it feel like I was leaving the outside world and walking into a comforting, private oasis. I arrived at the front door and entered the beech wood foyer greeted by a smartly uniformed housekeeper. The house was different than I had imagined; it had much more of a homey, family-friendly atmosphere. I saw beautiful, prodigious furniture, expensive I'm sure, but more comfy than ostentatious. The feel inside the home was bright with happy colours and traditional decor, clearly influenced by Suzanne's style and feminine touch. The silver and blue dining room seated fourteen and was immediately to the left; here I was welcomed in to set up for the interview. Awaiting me were carefully placed dessert plates and three shiny silver trays with six different styles of cookies, including a selection of very quaint peach and lime green puffs.

Suzanne walked in and introduced herself with a friendly smile, looking immaculate in her brightly coloured dress, perfectly executed make-up and her long blonde hair swept to the side. Soon afterwards, curious to see what was going on, Suzanne's husband Edward casually popped into the dining room.

Edward Rogers is the Chairman of Rogers Communications Inc. His father Ted Rogers was the visionary who started Rogers Cable TV in the 1960s. Edward, with an amiable smile explained he had just come from a workout, and to please excuse his casual dress. He was endearing, with a down to earth energy. We chatted a bit about fitness and Fit-bit tracking, and in those brief three minutes of conversation I thought to myself, these two seem like a good match. I liked them.

As comfortable as Suzanne may now be with her role and status in this iconic, famous Canadian family, she was not born into wealth. Suzanne is proud of her humble beginnings, as a miner's daughter of Hungarian immigrants. Born in Elliot Lake, Ontario, tragic circumstances were a part of her young life when her biological father, Miklos, died in a mining accident when she was just an infant. A few years later Suzanne's mother met her step father Martin, and shortly after her sister was born. From her grandmother hiding photo albums, to a mysterious grave site visit, young Suzanne had a feeling something was different. "The first time I felt that my stepfather was not my real father was when I was very little, about four. My mother took me to his grave at Elliot Lake. She didn't say "He is your father"... she said, "There is 'somebody very special' here." Suzanne was officially told about her 'step' father relationship when she was about eight years old.

In the summers, Suzanne would visit her relatives in Hungary and her stepfather's family in Romania. The relatives back home dealt first hand with communism; from waiting for hours in line for

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1 SPECIAL FEATURE

AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW





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Young Suzanne with Family at their European Deli (boy included is a friend)  
PHOTO COURTESY OF SUZANNE ROGERS



Four Generations: Suzanne with her Mother, Grandmother and Daughter (as a teen)  
PHOTO COURTESY OF SUZANNE ROGERS

## Her parents worked long hours, and the family lived above the storefront.

bread, to being cautious with words - for fear of neighbours reporting to authorities. Suzanne remembers the sounds of late night announcements from the dictatorship on the single TV channel. "As a child these eastern European politics were part of my young life." She heard stories about the Hungarian revolution, and how her then 13 year old father and his best friend left home with a loaf of bread, catching a bus headed to Austria.

Prior to marrying her mother, Suzanne's step father lived in a rooming house, sacrificing and saving to buy a building in St. Thomas Ontario, where the family would open a European delicatessen. Her parents worked long hours, and the family lived above the storefront. This is where Suzanne spent much of her childhood, doing homework at the deli's back table and playing in the rear warehouse. Suzanne learned about a strong family work ethic, while customers marvelled at the adorable 10 year old who helped serve coffee.

Their European deli was successful, but the family maintained humble means, with Salvation Army and

Goodwill being included as shopping outlets. However that didn't stop Suzanne from being creative and bold with her fashion style. Although teen Suzanne wasn't allowed to wear mini-skirts or jeans, she was otherwise given reign to choose her own wardrobe, and she made the most of it. She was a confident child, who loved fashion and wasn't afraid to be daring with her choices. From outlandish bomber jackets to extreme zipper pants: "Fashion whispered in my life somehow."

Today, Suzanne is known as a Canadian fashion icon, not only for her personal style, but also as someone who organizes and participates in various fashion events and galas to help raise funds for charity. The Edward and Suzanne Rogers Foundation has assisted several organizations over the years. Suzanne spoke with particular passion about the organizations who support fragile children: "There are so many smaller charities that go unnoticed that I try to bring attention to, grassroots charities that really make an impact in so many people's lives." Suzanne was ardent about using her name and influence to maximize charitable funding for the organizations she supports: "A cheque is just a cheque. If I can get an organization to get twenty cheques, then I think that is very impactful."

Their charitable foundation is also instrumental in supporting emerging fashion designers and educational programs with partners such as Toronto

Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson). One of Suzanne's big initiatives is "Suzanne Rogers Presents" - a prestigious charity gala that showcases the work of internationally renowned fashion designers. Suzanne shared with me her experience in flying to New York to launch the program and pitch the first designer to come on board. A fellow you may have heard of ... Oscar de la Renta.

"I had a whole presentation. I was so nervous to meet this icon. I sat in that car and my entire body was covered in sweat ... I knew if I got him, that would have a huge impact for the charity and the city." To date, the event series has raised close to 4 million dollars for charity.

Although Suzanne grew up helping at the family deli, she also had stints throughout university as a Kelsey's waitress, nanny and a resort housekeeper. "I had jobs. I loved working... It was an independence for me."

She worked in a variety of roles as an executive assistant, within tech companies and as a junior producer for a commercial effects studio: "My first real job, I got \$35,000 a year. I could afford my own apartment, and thought 'I made it!'. Nobody has a salary like this!" If she only knew what the future would hold.

Suzanne and her husband Edward originally met as teenagers (she was his date for the prom!). "I married the man



I loved." Marriage and family are very important to her, but Suzanne wasn't conventional. The couple dated on and off and she didn't feel the need to get married right away. "I had Chloe with my husband Edward in my twenties but we waited to get married." It seems her daughter, now 26, was influenced by her mother's love of design. Chloe was accepted into the prestigious Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London, which led to starting her own fashion line. But as Suzanne was quick to mention: "She got into that school because she worked hard for it, not because I made a phone call." About a decade later, Suzanne and Edward added two boys to the mix, Edward 18 and Jack 16. There was an emotional moment at one point in the interview when Suzanne talked about having an empty nest; her boys were getting older. The realization had recently hit her, and she was impassioned to spend as much time with the teens before they left for university.

Suzanne's mother was a powerful influence on her: "I've always liked myself, because I had a mother who instilled confidence in me. My self esteem was never knocked down because of the mistakes I made." As a mom Suzanne is hands on, there for her kids; although she does not believe in being a helicopter parent or being overly strict: "You are there to be a mother, a parent to guide them. I've always let them be independent... but was always supportive."

Suzanne describes herself as someone who has never forgotten her family and humble roots: "My work ethic started when I was 8 years old. I had to work for something if I wanted it. That was just the way I grew up." She comments that her husband Edward also works very hard and that strong work ethic is just a part of the family dynamic: "You do have to work hard if you want to accomplish something. There is nobody lounging around my house. Everybody is doing something."

Outside of family, I was wondering who Suzanne hangs out with. I imagine it must be difficult at times, not knowing if people are being nice to you because of your wealth, status or last name. I admit I was curious about Suzanne's friendships - are all her friends rich? As I was trying to figure out a polite way to ask the question, she brought up the topic of friendships. Both she and Edward still have close friends from their university

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Event "Suzanne Rogers Presents"  
with Oscar de la Renta - 2010  
PHOTO COURTESY OF PETER BREGG





Rogers Family Photo - 2011  
PHOTO COURTESY OF TERESA BARBIERI

days, and it was a hard: “No” - not all her friends are wealthy. “The majority of my friends I have known for 20 plus years. I love meeting new people. But the closest to me are people that have been in my life for decades.”

Suzanne met her best friend Jennifer when they were in grade eight. When the young women were 18 Jennifer worked in Paris for a period of time as a nanny. She had her own tiny nanny suite and Suzanne came to visit her for a few weeks, where they would often go out to the clubs in Paris. With limited funds, the girls had to strategize their evenings; they either shared a meal, or took a cab ride home, they couldn't afford both.

There was a time when Suzanne and Jennifer tried to get into the Ritz Hotel lobby: “We were dressed up, but you could tell... maybe it was the fake plastic purses ... they didn't let us into the lobby of the Ritz. Then about 15 years ago during Fashion Week I took her and we stayed there. Amazing how my life had changed. But I was just as happy at 18 ... and appreciated both experiences.”

Today as part of a well known, iconic family, everything you do can be under scrutiny. Suzanne admits she felt some vulnerable moments, especially at the beginning of her marriage. Her father-in-law Ted Rogers, who she describes as: “a lovely man, kind and the best

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Suzanne and Jennifer in Paris,  
Two Moments in Time  
PHOTO COURTESY OF SUZANNE ROGERS

father-in-law a girl could have” gave her some advice. Her fashion style and beauty often brought the attention of media and photographers. He said: “Be photographed for the work you do ... be the most important person in the room because of what you do, not because of what you wear.”

I believe people are revealed through their actions and what they contribute, more than their words. One of the privileges of wealth brings the freedom to choose what you do with your time. To honour her father's grave and the other men who died in the mines, each year on April 28th, on the National Day of Mourning this miner's daughter makes the time to take a trip back home to Elliot Lake to visit Miners' Memorial Park.

Perhaps this small but important act gives us a closer glimpse into the woman who is - Suzanne Rogers. ■

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