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Adele Grunberg's Excellent Adventures



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Cover photo by Gary Schatan



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Adele Grunberg's Excellent Adventures

By Randy Lyman

Photos by Gary Schatan and courtesy of Adele Grunberg



Inside the Arctic Circle in Svalbard, Norway (2019)

When Adele Grunberg moved to Montclair in the 1970s, it had no traffic lights, though she remembers the Roberts supermarket. Montclair “felt more small town-ish than now,” she recalled recently. It never occurred to her, fresh out of college in Boston, that she’d be spending the rest of her life in California.

Now Adele is coming up on 50 years as a local resident. She’s occupied the same house in Piedmont Pines for 36 years; 11 years in Montclair before that. “I moved to this area because I love the hills, the variety of housing, the fact that it’s close to downtown Oakland, yet feels as though it’s in the country. Mostly I love my home and garden,” she said, adding that she started gardening as therapy after the 9/11 attacks two decades ago. “I still consider it to be therapy.”

A Career in Conflict

Today she works as a therapist of sorts — a mediator and conflict resolution coach. With a law degree and an MA in psychology, she has a private practice doing workplace conflict resolution (resolveyourconflict.com), as well as communication training and coaching. “It’s the work that I love the most out of all the work I do,” she said.

“In our culture, we don’t seem to put an emphasis on effective communication. I work with people who don’t deal well with conflict — they avoid it or exacerbate it. So I’m doing some really fascinating, important and creative work with people to address those issues.” Now in her 70s, “I’m thrilled at where I am in my work life. How many people can say that?”



With newborn Opal (age 17 days) at an elephant rescue sanctuary in Thailand. One of Adele's most memorable adventures was caring for an 80-year-old elephant, Dokma, for three days. She fed and rode her ward, scooped her poop, and bathed her in the river. (2009)

Adele had decided at age 15 to become a lawyer. "I never wanted to do anything else," she said. But once she tried it, reality set in. "I didn't want to work as a trial lawyer anymore because I found it depleting," she said, "a lose-lose situation. Even if you win, the process of going through it can be so negative."

She worked as a trial attorney for the California Department of Transportation for 13 years. Among her cases were the 1982 Caldecott Tunnel accident and fire and the Bay Bridge and Cypress Freeway collapse in 1989.

She was about to quit law entirely but instead was appointed as an administrative law judge for the state's Unemployment Insurance Appeals Board. "It was fine but not as challenging as being a lawyer." She's still a judge two days a week, and for many years did workplace conflict resolution for the State Mediation and Conciliation Service. Since 1999 she's also been a volunteer with the nonprofit SEEDS Community Resolution Center, where she coaches mediator trainees.

A Life at Peace

Adele is private about her family life but said she's been married for 41 years to an attorney (now retired), who she met at work. "We kept it a secret for a year and a half and then sprung it on the Deputy Chief Counsel, who practically fell off his chair. We swore him to secrecy until we went away to get married" and then on a six-week European honeymoon.

She also has a daughter who's a product manager at a tech company and an avid hiker, backpacker, and rock climber — skills no doubt helpful when she volunteers with Alameda County Search and Rescue. "She's wilderness-trained, and an essential person to have along on a hike," Adele said. "She has hiked with me all over the world. She grew up playing the piano, trumpet, and soccer, and took ballet. She is incredibly smart, funny, and accomplished."

Three days before moving to California, Adele bought a puppy to bring with her. She describes herself as a "dog person" who's had Golden Retrievers most of her life, until the last one crossed the rainbow bridge a decade ago. "I decided not to get another because I travel so much." Today she has only a 13-year-old tuxedo cat named Xiaomao, whose name means "little cat."

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She has animal stories, though, like the time she was charged by an elephant in Botswana.

A World of Adventure

“Being reared on Disney movies, I felt no fear. This was just like Dumbo” until she found herself running for her life through sand carrying heavy camera gear, she wrote of the experience.

Adele grew up middle class in Brooklyn — her mother was a homemaker, her father had a business — but today she’s an avid traveler. She tells of her adventures in a travel blog, Postcards from Adele (postcardsfromadele.com). “Summer camp in New England was about as far afield as I went from my home in New York. I didn’t board a plane until I was 17,” she writes.

The homepage shows a world map with scores of pins on all seven continents, including Antarctica. She’s been as far north as the Arctic Circle, spanned the Americas from Alaska to Patagonia, and covered Africa, Europe, Australia, and southeastern Asia.

“I started writing postcards to friends, who liked them,” she said, before deciding to start a travel blog in 2016. “I don’t write about where I stay or where I eat. There are other sources that do that. I talk about things that inspire me or unique experiences, things that really resonate with me.”

Dictionary Days

Safe at home, Adele is a Board member of the nonprofit Volunteering For Oakland (volforoak.org), where she has been Director of the Dictionary Day project for the past decade. VFO



Warming up Iceland (2017)



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raises grant money to buy dictionaries from National Dictionary Project in South Carolina. “I arrange with principals and third grade teachers at OUSD elementary schools to schedule Dictionary Day at all schools that want it. We volunteers give the books as gifts and spend half an hour or so in each class exploring the books with the students. We reach an average of thirty schools each academic year.”

She did one the morning of our interview. They discussed the fifty states, Roman numerals, Braille, sign language, and more. “There are just so many topics in here that are interesting, as well as exploring how you use a dictionary.”

“I think it’s important to have this kind of contact,” Adele said, describing how hard the pandemic has been on these kids and their teachers, affecting learning, social skills, and more.

“And it’s important because I have been told some of the students don’t have books of their own at home. The dictionary may be their first. In fact, I had one child ask today ‘Is this mine to keep?’”

And so another life of learning and adventure begins.



Atop Mitchell Peak in Kings Canyon National Park (2022)

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