

Deb Rosen became executive director of Bivona Child Advocacy Center in April

By VELVET SPICER

Deb Rosen grew up surrounded by altruism.

“My mother, my brother and my sister-in-law are all social workers,” says the 48-year-old executive director of Bivona Child Advocacy Center. “And my father is an architect, but he has worked in the homelessness and affordable housing field for many years.”

A family passion for aiding others has helped guide Rosen’s career path, from in-the-trenches social work to behind-the-scenes development efforts to her current role overseeing an organization that serves nearly 2,000 abused or neglected children annually.

Bivona has an operating budget of \$1.75 million, up from \$1 million four years ago, and employs 16 people at the Skalny Building on Mt. Hope Avenue. The organization has a sizable number of volunteers and works in formal partnership with 22 agencies that are part of a memorandum of understanding to provide coordinated services. Roughly 40 individuals from partner agencies also are located at the facility.

Bivona’s reach is the greater Monroe County area. With the goal of one child advocacy center operating per county in New York, some 61 percent of counties statewide are covered by the National Children’s Alliance accredited members.

NCA is the national association and accrediting body for children’s advocacy centers. This year the NCA, under a cooperative agreement with the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, will administer \$8.1 billion in federal funds for the establishment, improvement and expansion of children’s advocacy centers.

In its first decade beginning in 2004, Bivona tripled the number of children evaluated, tripled its partnerships, tripled its operating budget and went through three facility upgrades. Bivona has helped 17,000 children since its inception, and the organization continues to grow, Rosen says.

“We continue to serve children at a rate that would project us to stay on course or increase the scale of our services every year,” Rosen says.

Which is great; and not great. “I mean, it is representative of a community in which child abuse and neglect is happening at a rate that is unacceptable,” she says. “And this is really true of all communities in the United States.”

#### Its start

Bivona was founded as a three-person organization working in partnership with other agencies to provide comprehensive, coordinated services to children affected by abuse and neglect.

Bivona acts as the convening agency of the partnership that makes up the child advocacy center. The agency provides prevention, education, community outreach related to child abuse and neglect, and also provides comprehensive medical, forensic, mental health and prosecutorial services for children.

Some of the nonprofit and governmental partner agencies include Catholic Family Center, law enforcement agencies in 12 jurisdictions, Monroe County Child Protective Services, Monroe County District Attorney’s Office and Villa of Hope, among others.

“On the prevention and education side, we have a small staff that does outreach into schools, neighborhood organizations really to provide education about risk factors related to abuse and neglect,” Rosen says. “We also offer victim advocacy, and victim advocacy is central to the services we provide.”

Victim advocates coordinate referrals to a network of community services.

“So if a family has come to us regarding maltreatment a child has experienced, our victim advocates really take on the full breadth of what that family’s needs are and operate as sort of case managers or social workers do in other settings to coordinate services,” Rosen explains.

Teamwork and collaboration are crucial to Bivona’s success, staffers say.

“It’s very team-oriented, so you never feel alone in what you’re doing,” says Anna Potter, the organization’s associate executive director. “There are always resources available. When calls come in or issues come in, you don’t have to go far to find an answer or get a

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### Deb Rosen

**Title:** Executive director, Bivona Child Advocacy Center

**Age:** 48

**Education:** B.A., women’s studies, 1991, University of Wisconsin; masters of social work, 1996, University of Wisconsin

**Family:** Husband, Larry Marx; daughters Natalie, 15; and Naomi, 13

**Home:** Brighton

**Hobbies:** Reading, bicycling and hiking

**Quote:** “Leadership is a tremendous privilege, and I think it’s good guidance to feel profoundly grateful for the opportunity and responsible to it.”

resolution.”

Singularity of purpose is an important component in Bivona’s success in the community, Rosen says.

“This organization is not confused about what we are doing and has never been confused about what we are doing,” she says. “We have been remarkably adept at avoiding mission-drift and we, it’s sad to say, have our work cut out for us.”

Bivona and its partner agencies are joined in and energized by a mission to help protect vulnerable children who experience maltreatment, Rosen adds.

“That’s No. 1. No. 2, we have been very effective in communicating the importance of that mission to the larger community,” she says. “We have had consistently a board of directors that is knowledgeable about the issues that we’re dealing with and are really prepared to take action on behalf of the children that we serve. And that is true of our volunteer community as well.”

Bivona has been prudent about choosing what programs, services and activities it involves itself in, Rosen adds, so its resources are directed and aligned in that direction.

“We are not attending to 15 different adjacent issues. We are really tending to a concentrated scope of service,” she says.

Additionally, Bivona’s staff and partner agencies are experts in their field, Potter adds.

“If you look at the comprehensive services, we have all the disciplines needed from start to finish,” she says.

Ann Lenane M.D. serves as medical director for Golisano Children’s Hospital at Strong’s Referral and Evaluation of Abused Children, or REACH, program. The organization is a partner agency of the child advocacy center.

“I think it would be hard to imagine going back to the days before we all worked as a team,” Lenane says. “Child abuse is such a complicated problem. There (are) medical aspects to the problem, but there’s also the social work and protective aspects, the legal aspects. There’s the support and advocacy aspects for the family, there’s counseling aspects.”

“For us to be part of that whole thing, I just can’t imagine doing the job any other way,” she says.

Helping to create a community that is significantly more aware of threats to child safety is Bivona’s long-term goal, Rosen says.

“And to mobilize that community to take action to protect our children,” she adds. “And we are doing much of that activity, but we have a ways to go, both in terms of the scale and scope of the audience that we’re reaching and in terms of the depth of services that we’re offering.”

Forging better relationships with schools and school districts will go far toward reaching that goal, Rosen says.

“We need for schools and school districts to understand that when they have a concern about the well-being of a student in their midst, and they have reason to attribute that to maltreatment or suspicions of maltreatment, they need to be in conversation with us,” she says.

“Schools have the tremendous privilege and responsibility of interacting with thousands of children a day. Children



## Leader’s passion runs in the family

are our most vulnerable citizens, and children are at significant risk of abuse and neglect.”

Rosen also would like to build a tighter network of mental health providers who are able to provide skilled, competent responses to children who have experienced trauma.

Bivona serves children up to age 18, and in special circumstances, those older than 18. The organization increasingly is using social media to get its message out and raise awareness of child abuse and neglect.

Volunteers also play a crucial role in communicating with the public.

“I really think of volunteers as being a very important, concentric circle around the organization that are capable of carrying the message forward,” Rosen says. “So we are using people, whether they are staff or volunteers, to raise awareness and communicate facts and dispel myths.”

Rosen says one challenge the agency faces is the impact of multigenerational poverty. The human services sector generally has a relative inability to keep up with the depth of need in highly traumatized families, she adds.

Our community, she says, has a real scarcity of competent mental health services, affordable housing resources and other connections.

“We really just see families that continue to be in a state of distress for a prolonged period of time, and despite some really remarkable and smart efforts we don’t seem to be getting ahead of that curve,” Rosen says. “I think as a sector we need to acknowledge that that’s the problem. The problem isn’t this staffing shortage there or that funding shortage here; the problem is we have a community in great distress.”

Potter says the biggest challenge she sees at the advocacy center is the fact that people often do not think about child abuse until they are in a situation where they are forced to.

“You don’t really think about it because it’s not something that you really need to learn about. Everyone thinks it’s an inner city problem, but really it permeates every walk of life,” Potter says. “We say that child abuse is 100 percent preventable.”

#### Family focus

Rosen always has been fascinated by families and family dynamics, she says.

“Even as a little kid I was really curious about other people’s families,” she says. “I did my graduate program at University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, which has a very high-quality child and family systems track. And it totally captured my imagination.”

Rosen has been tackling the child abuse problem and others since then. But it was her first job—scooping ice cream at Don & Bob’s restaurant in Brighton—that taught her a valuable lesson she would take with her through life.

“I truly learned a lesson that abso-

lutely serves me every day. And that is simply, everybody is your customer,” Rosen says. “Everybody has a first job. And I think we tend to make light of it but the truth of the matter is it really is your first entry into a whole, huge chapter of your life.”

The next chapter, following her college graduation, led to years on the ground as a social worker. In Wisconsin she had a long stint at one agency and shorter stints at others.

When she and her family returned to Rochester, Rosen joined Coordinated Care Services Inc. and then worked for Hillside Family of Agencies. Rosen also worked as the director of the child and family services division of the Monroe County Department of Human Services before returning to Hillside in 2014.

During her second stint at Hillside, Rosen was managing director of strategic development. Jennifer Cathy, executive director of the Greater Monroe Region at Hillside Children’s Center, worked closely with Rosen.

“Deb was incredibly supportive around trying to launch initiatives that really empowered community-based services and lifted community-based services,” Cathy recalls. “She was very thoughtful in her decisions. She had a wealth of knowledge that really no one else at the organization had and a certain number of experiences that allowed her to drive plans forward.”

Rosen’s top concern, Cathy says, was child welfare and trauma-informed foster care placement. Trauma-informed care is grounded in an understanding of the neurological, biological, psychological and social effects of trauma.

“One of the things Deb and I always spoke about was our worry about young people in foster care and the need for them to have a set of services and treatment interventions that were incredibly trauma-informed and really strengthened each child and family,” Cathy says. “Every decision that she made, she was always very thoughtful and conscious about child welfare and what was best for families.”

Rosen joined Bivona in April, following the departure of founding Executive Director Mary Whittier. It is a role others say she was born to take on.

“As soon as I heard (about) the job opening I knew in my heart that it was exactly where she needed to be,” Cathy says.

Rosen says she brings to the table a relational leadership style.

“I really sort of see everything through the lens of relationships, and I really think that we get our best work done by thinking together and working together to solve problems and generate new ideas,” she says. “I’m not going to do as good a job solving a problem if I’m doing it on my own. I will definitely do a better job of it working with a team.”

Rosen is thoughtful in her work with cohorts, others say.

“As one of the partner agencies, what I see is her really taking time to lis-

ten and get to know everyone, to see how the teams work together, see how the different organizations work, see what the needs are and also see what our plans and dreams for the future are like,” REACH’s Lenane says. “I feel like she’s taking on the leadership role the right way, first by listening and getting to know everybody and then focusing on the mission and helping us accomplish our goals.”

Rosen is good at looking at the bigger picture, Potter adds.

“And looking at the program services so that she can lead in networking and seeing how we can collaborate in different ways,” Potter says. “Deb’s leadership is going to a deeper level. The timing is perfect for Deb’s expertise to lead Bivona into a richer service that we’re going to provide in the community.”

#### At home

Born and raised in Rochester, Rosen and her family make Brighton their home. She and her husband, Larry Marx, have two daughters: Natalie, 15, and Naomi, 13.

Rosen says she has many fond family memories, but one stands out: When her family moved back to Rochester her daughters were young and missed their home in Wisconsin. To make them feel better, the couple created a new family tradition. They began taking the kids in their pajamas to Donuts Delite.

In her spare time Rosen enjoys reading, and says she is a “big consumer of stories.” She and Marx also enjoy biking and hiking together. Rosen is on the board of directors of the YWCA.

Marx also is a nonprofit leader, as CEO of the Children’s Agenda, an agency that improves the health, education and success of the community’s children through solutions and policy change at the local, state and federal levels. He has changed Rosen’s life, she says.

“He is someone who has always made every professional choice in accordance with his values and philosophies,” she says. “He has been utterly uncompromising in that way; in some not very easy ways.”

“And it’s pretty inspiring to see and pretty inspiring to live side-by-side with someone who chooses to say yeah, I could make a lot of money doing something else but that’s not what my conscience tells me to do.”

Working with abused and neglected children can be difficult, Rosen acknowledges.

“There’s a lot of sadness, a lot of grief and a lot of anxiety attached to this work, but there is also an incredible amount of reward and joy,” Rosen says. “Another way to look at it is we get to work with children and help them and help their parents help them. And that’s a pretty special place to be.”

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