

# Big Enough

Harris Rosen spent the first half of his career making millions and the second half giving away millions. From Hell's Kitchen in New York to a Quality Inn in Orlando, here is his story.

**H**arris Rosen was fired.

His bosses at Walt Disney World told him that they didn't believe he would ever become "a company man." So, they fired him.

Harris didn't disagree. Despite his successes developing the Contemporary, Polynesian and Fort Wilderness resorts, he realized that he couldn't be what Disney wanted him to be.

"I finally came to the conclusion that I most likely didn't have the organization man's personality," says Rosen. "I've known since an early age that I've been inflicted with what I call that awful defective entrepreneurial gene. Deep down inside I knew that one day I was destined to be in business for myself."

For Rosen, playing it safe is a risky proposition.

So after leaving Disney, he withdrew his last \$20,000 from savings and put a down payment on a 256-room Quality Inn on Orlando's International Drive. And that's where it all began.

Today, located off a nondescript corridor in that same Quality Inn, he continues to defy expectations. Rosen's office feels more like a cozy living room than the opulent offices presumed for the innovator who built the largest independently owned hotel group

in Florida. Instead of fine art and interior decorator touches, the room bursts with artifacts from real life. A large photo of his Russian grandfather Harry Rosenovsky. Rosen's wallet-sized U.S. Army ID card. An autographed sketch of baseball great Jackie Robinson—drawn by Rosen when he was 10 years old. His judo uniform, recently recovered from his mother's condo. Amidst it all, his two dogs, Apple and Bambi, wander freely.

"I've been in this room for 37 years," Rosen says, "This is not exactly what people who aspire to be successful dream of having ... beautiful offices and private planes and condos all over the place. But for me, it's very comfortable."

#### Marilyn Monroe and Mom's Advice

**H**arris Rosen's first job in hospitality was helping his dad finish and distribute hand-lettered place cards for banquets at the Waldorf Astoria in New York. He was paid a penny a card—a fortune by a 10-year-old's standards. Even more valuable was the chance encounter that set him on the path he would follow the rest of his life.

"One day, we walk into the elevator, and the most magnificent lady, a blonde lady with a beautiful



#### BIG DOG

Rosen's office is as unassuming as he is. His dogs, Bambi and Apple (not pictured), are frequent officemates.



**DREAM BIG**

In 1993, Harris Rosen “adopted” a run-down, drug-infested section of Orlando called Tangelo Park. Rosen offers free preschool for all children prior to kindergarten and a free college education for high school graduates. Today, the high school graduation rate for Tangelo Park is 100 percent. And no, that is not a typo.

**TOP:** Dwyane Wade, Miami Heat point guard, visits Tangelo Park Elementary School during the NBA All-Star Weekend in Orlando to host an FCAT rally and donate \$100,000 to the school.

**RIGHT:** A Tangelo Park resident expresses her joy and appreciation for Rosen’s help in supporting her children and her community.



figure, was there with a very tall, distinguished gentleman,” he recalls. “I whispered to my dad, ‘Who is that?’ ... He turned and said, ‘Ambassador Kennedy, Marilyn, this is my son, Harris.’ It was Marilyn Monroe. That sealed it for me. I thought if I could meet all of these incredible people in an elevator, this really was a business that I might enjoy.”

While his father revealed a whole new world to Rosen, his mother showed him the path there.

Manhattan’s Lower East Side in the ‘40s and ‘50s was a crowded ghetto teeming with immigrants and afflicted with disease. Rosen recalls stepping over people in the street on his way to school and passing homeless crowds huddled beneath the elevated train line overpass. Still, he looks back on the neighborhood with fondness, admitting that he didn’t see anything wrong with it until the day a sightseeing bus came through and he heard a passenger remark, “So this is how they live.”

“My brother and I didn’t know what she meant,” he says. “Mom had to explain to us that not everyone lives this way. And if we didn’t want to live here for the rest of our lives, we had to work hard in school and get a good education.”

After a thoughtful pause he says simply, “Good advice.”

Though he took that advice, earning a bachelor’s degree in hotel administration from Cornell University, Rosen admits that he felt like an outsider looking in. “Me at an Ivy League school—I was an aberration!” he says.

**Building a College and a Legacy**

Like his encounter with Marilyn Monroe and his days at Cornell, Rosen has a way of casting even the largest efforts in a decidedly low-key light.

“I was having lunch with UCF Professor Abe Pizam, and I told him, ‘One day Abe, I will build you a new school.’ At the time, the hospitality program was part of the business school. There were about 75 students,” says Rosen.

Five years later, Rosen made good on his promise, pledging \$10 million in cash and 20 acres of property at his new resort, Rosen Shingle Creek. His contribution, however, came with certain conditions.

“I told President Hitt that I would really prefer if the new college be out there near the theme

parks, convention center and International Drive ... closer to where all of the action is.”

Rosen and his team were invited to help design the building. So he invited the deans from the top hospitality colleges in the nation—Cornell, Michigan State, UMass, UNLV—to be his weekend guests. Armed with their input, Rosen’s team of architects developed “a tremendous plan based on the best of the best of the best.” And in 2004, the Rosen College of Hospitality Management opened on time and on budget.

“I didn’t want to make a fuss out of the UCF donation,” Rosen says. “I was ready to just send a check in the mail. But President Hitt implored me not to do it that way. He said, ‘Let us make an announcement. Let us use your name. If people hear that you’re doing something, it might encourage others to do something.’ When he put it that way, I had to say okay.”

**Mom had to explain to us that not everyone lives this way. And if we didn’t want to live here for the rest of our lives, we had to work hard in school and get a good education.**

Today, with founding Dean Abe Pizam at the helm and 3,500 students enrolled, the UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management is the largest hospitality program in the nation.

**An Impact Felt Across Generations**

“Epiphany might be too strong of a word ... it was more of a voice. A feeling that ‘now is the time.’ You’ve achieved more success than you ever imagined. It’s time now to recognize that you’ve been blessed ... to be thankful and to share your good fortune with others.”

Having had his own life so radically transformed by education, Rosen knew that this was an area he wanted to focus on, and Tangelo Park was the place.

Tangelo Park is built on land once used for orange groves. Originally built as housing for workers at the nearby Martin Marietta, it has become an isolated residential area. There are few services nearby for residents, and few public

transit options. African Americans comprise 90 percent of the community, with many living below the poverty line.

“I fell in love with the neighborhood,” says Rosen. “I knew I wanted to do some type of scholarship program for them.”

The Tangelo Park Program, started in 1993, gives every neighborhood child age 2 to 4 access to free preschool. Parents have access to parenting classes, vocational courses and technical training.

For a program that took just one hour and four people to develop, the impact has been wide and deep. Tangelo Park Elementary is now a grade-A school. Every high school senior graduates.

But there’s more. Much more.

Every high school graduate who is accepted to a Florida public university, community or state college, or vocational school receives a full Harris Rosen Foundation scholarship, which covers tuition, living and educational expenses through graduation.

Nearly 200 students have earned Rosen scholarships and of those, 75 percent have graduated from college—the highest rate among an ethnic group in the nation.

“I was part of the first generation of pre-K children in the Tangelo Park Program. Now I’m about to be the first generation of my family to go to college,” says Antionette Butler, a senior at Dr. Phillips High School. Butler plans to use her Rosen scholarship to attend UCF and study neurology.

Donna Wilcox used her Rosen scholarship to earn a bachelor’s degree in interpersonal/organizational communication at UCF, and then went on to complete her M.A. in mass communications at the University of Georgia.

“When people have the resources to go and succeed, there’s a ripple effect,” she says. “It becomes generational. No one in my family ever went to college before, but now, my baby sister can’t even picture a life without college. My mother even went back and got her degree. I showed her that she could do it.”

After spending \$9 million on his adopted neighborhood of 2,500 residents, Rosen was asked if the program has a stopping point.

“I will be involved in the program until Tangelo Park is a gated community and the average home is selling for \$1 million. Then I’m gone.” ♦