

from hippie to ceo of the mikvah

by Tzivia Emmer

Timmy Rubin's face lights up when she talks about her job running the Lubavitch mikvah in Melbourne, Australia. Timmy (whose Hebrew name is Tamara) has been mikvah lady for the beautiful "five-star" facility since it opened 12 years ago, having received a blessing from the Lubavitcher Rebbe to move back to her native Australia and accept the job.

Saying Timmy is a mikvah lady, however, is something of an understatement. She and her husband, psychologist Dr. Kalman Rubin, have built an entire shlichus around the focal point of the mikvah. Dr. Rubin sees to the filtering and maintenance while Timmy conducts tours, goes on speaking engagements, speaks to Bat Mitzvah girls and their mothers, and attracts a whole new generation to Judaism by talking about mikvah and about her personal journey. Timmy emphasizes the shared shlichus of running the mikvah. "I'm only the front person," she says modestly. "My husband maintains it. Let me tell you, when you run a mikvah with 10 bathrooms to maintain and 20 appointments each night... It's complicated."

These days, when a woman is first introduced to the concept of mikvah immersion — a requirement for Orthodox marriage in Melbourne — she usually calls to make an appointment at "Timmy's mikvah." Timmy offers a warm mazel tov followed by an explanation of why it's important to go to some classes and learn what the mitzvah is all about. "Every time I help someone immerse," she says, "I feel that not only do I help her to connect, but it's like teshuvah for me too, part of my own spiritual return."

"Many of the young brides," Timmy says, "are accompanied to the mikvah by their mothers, and sometimes the mothers want to immerse as well. And then a strange thing happens," she says. "The young women who complained the most about not wanting to attend the classes — they start crying! All because the power of this mitzvah is higher than intellect." Hopefully that's the first step toward their spiritual renewal — the kind of renewal Timmy can relate to from her life.

Describing her adolescence as that of a typical Australian teenager, Timmy says she was into partying and fun. "I was a wild child," she admits. Like many of the teenagers she talks to, Timmy belonged to a Jewish youth group, Habonim. She also spent a year on a kibbutz in Israel. As a teacher for hearing impaired children she earned the money to travel around the world, spending three months in India before traveling to the United States to learn at Bais Chana and Machon Chana.

She talks to teens about her life's path and challenges them to reconsider their own lives. "The girls' favorite topic is "From Hippie to CEO of the Mikvah." Based on this interest, she poses these questions to them: "Even if your life is a blast, what's next? After taking all the external risks and all the relationship risks — then what?" Only after such open discussions does she begin to talk about the neshama and about the Lubavitcher Rebbe and her personal journey back to Judaism.

"Then they start to get really interested and ask lots of questions," she says.

Timmy's own journey began in her hometown of Melbourne, where she had a close group of friends and a life she enjoyed. One day a close friend returned from Israel, and Timmy picked her up at the airport.

"Whenever she talked about G-d she started crying. She was very passionate. I thought, either she's flipped or she's got something..." At a Shabbat dinner after that, Timmy heard about a special class being given by Reb Zalman Serebryanski, a respected elder chasid in Melbourne. This led to a unique relationship that lasted for many years, until Reb Zalman's passing in 1991.

"I went [to the class] and the first lesson was Tanya. Reb Zalman looked at me and I felt like I saw the rest of my

life. Reb Zalman became Timmy's spiritual mentor, and sent her many letters while she was learning Torah in Crown Heights. "The letters are my most precious possession," she says. "And it's Reb Zalman's son, Arel Serebryanski, who built the mikvah that I now run. Reb Arel is mashpia (spiritual advisor) to the Rubins. We both learn with him."

But back when Timmy arrived in the U.S., she was still testing the waters and stayed at Bais Chana in Minnesota for just three days. "I wasn't religious," she says, "I was interested but I wasn't committed yet." A year later she returned to Bais Chana, already engaged to her future husband and fully committed. "I was going to get married in three months, making all my arrangements, learning every day and every night, and having the time of my life. It was probably one of the best years of my life -- at Machon Chana and Bais Chana. It was just so stimulating and nurturing. Even the food at Bais Chana was nurturing. I remember the whole experience as being cocooned and being brought up again and given some of the values that were not emphasized in my own home. Even though I've got wonderful parents, I feel like I missed out on certain values and structure. The learning gave me the tools to be able to get married and to bring up a family."

Timmy returned to Australia to run the Lubavitch mikvah when she was expecting her third child (she now has four children - two boys and two girls). She learned what she needed to know in order to serve as a mikvah lady from several teachers. One rebbetzin spoke specifically about the kind of sensitivity one must have in this role.

"She said that each time a woman comes before you to immerse, you have to empty yourself of all self feeling... For the moment that you're with her you have to try to merge with her, become her. Just try to feel: if she wants you to talk, you talk - if she wants you to be quiet, be quiet. You just do your job as quickly and subtly as possible so she doesn't feel shy or embarrassed, and then just let G-d do the rest."

Not surprisingly, Timmy and Kalman have taken their sensitivity and dedication to their mikvah shlichus one step further to co-conduct workshops and counsel teens and their families. "We love to do that work too, because they're fresh," Timmy says. "They're open. Look, it takes confidence to be naughty. I was. I was such a risk-taker. It made me feel confident when I got away with things. So we understand." Timmy believes that nearly every kid who's in trouble can be reached. "There's got to be nurturing and love and acceptance no matter what. Unconditional love in a balance," she says. "Not too strict and not too lenient... They just need direction."

Timmy and Kalman feel blessed that through their mikvah shlichus and counseling work they have formed a total attachment to Hashem that permeates every aspect of their lives.

Tzivia Emmer is a writer and editor living in Crown Heights, she attended Bais Chana in the 1970s.