

# Roxana Bonderson: Empowerment Through Action

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"Let me check my schedule. Okay, yes, I can squeeze in a meeting after I get home from work, and before my night of Worldhealer meetings. I'm really looking forward to our meeting!" This is a typical response from Roxana Bonderson. Her passion and dedication are apparent from the second you meet her.

Santa Barbara is where she experienced her childhood, and after years of being away, she currently lives in Santa Barbara. After high school and through adulthood, however, she has lived in far more places than the common person. She has visited 62 countries, lived in Italy, Germany, Cuba, and Brazil, and has conducted research in South America, Far East Asia, Australia, North Africa, and the United States. Roxana speaks English, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, German, and Farsi.

Roxana thrives on both adventure and empowerment. She has significant experience in both given her past travel habits. Throughout this process, she has particularly become involved in both the field of architecture and tangible ways to educate, mobilize and empower diverse groups of people. Today, Roxana serves as the Vice Chair of the City of Santa Barbara's Planning Commission, owns an LLC called Power Planning Services, and is the founder of a 501(c)3 nonprofit called Worldhealer.

## Early Life

Roxana Bonderson was born in Detroit, Michigan on October 24, 1976. At the age of five, she and her family moved to Santa Barbara, California. As early as age 5, Roxana could be found drawing houses, floor plans and cityscapes like freeways, bridges, and other architectural structures. She would collect the cardboard backs of her mother's notebooks and draw parts of a city. With more and more cardboard, she would add pieces and in the end an entire community would be built. As you can see, Roxana has had a natural talent and innate passion for architecture and city planning since an early age.

When Roxana began her journey through school, she accumulated experiences that would shape her into the person that she is today. She is the daughter of a Swedish-American father and Persian mother. Given her tan skin, dark and curly hair, the fact that she spoke a different language, and grew up with other cultures in her home, Roxana was often confronted with stereotypes and prejudice. Experiences like this are what has led to her dedication combating ignorance, injustice and bullying through Worldhealer, which aims to increase knowledge and appreciation of different cultures, traditions, and diversity through global awareness education.

Roxana attended San Marcos High School and graduated top of her class in 1994. During her high school years, she focused on her passion for architecture. To gain experience in this field, she interned for an architecture studio and attended classes at Santa Barbara City College to work towards her goal while still in high school.

## Navigating Through College

After high school, Roxana went to California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo (Cal Poly SLO). Here, she would face more obstacles, which today she would categorize as another form of bullying and exclusion. Many of the professors within the architecture program at Cal Poly SLO had their students take the Myers-Briggs Personality Test. Some of you might have taken it yourself. If you have taken this test, you might have noticed that your personality type will change based on current life events, mood, and general growth. The architecture program prioritized one personality type: INTP, "The Architect". Their goal was to have their students show the ideal personality type behavior that architects typically demonstrate. Roxana had ESFJ, which was the exact opposite and which often created more distance between her and her classmates

Throughout the program's selection process, the professors often rejected the students that did not fit their ideal personality type, causing most to drop out. As a result of this process, the number of students who graduated from this program with Roxana dropped from approximately 500 students to approximately 50 students. Roxana, with her head strong determination, remained in the program against all the opposition. Students, and even professors, were not thrilled that she was unwilling to leave the program even though she did not have an "ideal personality type." After juggling school, being the student body vice president, and work experience, she decided to study abroad to diversify her experience further. This allowed her a whole new and more positive college experience.

Fulfilling her dream of studying architecture in Italy, Roxana spent her fourth year of school in Florence. Once her classmates returned, she stayed independently to start her fifth year thesis project, focusing her research on urban design, people's social behaviors, and how they use their environment. For her last six months, Roxana returned to the Cal Poly SLO campus and during one of her classes, a new professor introduced the Myers Briggs test because he had just found out about it and thought it was interesting, unaware that the students had taken the test several times since their enrollment. After taking the test, almost all the students, as expected, scored INTP. Roxana, being the only one in the class that did not receive this score, stood out to the students and her professor. While a lot of the students thought poorly about her personality type, the professor thought otherwise. The professor began to explain that a lot of fields, architecture being one of them, need people with this outgoing personality type to lead a company, maintain the clients, and fight for their projects. Only one person could own and lead the company while several would work for that one person - Roxana would be that one who would give them all jobs and lead the way. He went on to explain that limiting the variety of people in a given field will hurt the industry because there will be less skill types to utilize that field's knowledge. This was the first time Roxana felt seen and appreciated while being alone with her unique personality type in her class.

In June 1999, after graduating with a Bachelor's degree in architecture and specialization in urban design, Roxana returned to Italy where she worked in an architecture studio, taught English at an international school, and was the assistant to the architect at an archeological excavation to document the findings of Horace's Villa outside of Rome.

During this time, her undergrad thesis proposing a Riverfront Promenade on the Arno River in Florence was selected and archived at the Uffizi Gallery by the City's Planning Department which allowed her to collaborate with them for many more months after graduating. Having such a wide variety of activities allowed her to grow exponentially and thrive quickly in her career.



## Developing Her Career

During the next few years, she had the opportunity to volunteer to build a house that she helped design for a Habitat for Humanity Jimmy Carter Work Project site in Georgia, USA. This allowed her to not only learn how to build a house with her own bare hands, expanding her structural knowledge of architecture, but the experience immediately followed studying abroad in Cuba with a traveling class. The two experiences were such a juxtaposition of one another that they impacted her life and changed the course of her career. She was exposed to an immeasurable level of poverty and social injustice where, due to decades of politics, people suffered never ending destitute only 89 miles off the coast of the United States, and yet in Georgia, people poured out in the thousands to volunteer to create new communities to give homes to the underprivileged. She learned that although many knew about the inhumane and dilapidated living conditions in Cuba, assistance to the country was discouraged, and even illegal. This was the first time Roxana saw the vast inequality in the world in such close proximity and a new urge to help was born within her. This was the fire that eventually led to the creation of Worldhealer.

At the age of 29, after working in architecture for over a decade and seeing more and more imbalance in the world and the communities she was working in, Roxana began to notice that certain forms of architectural design, as well as the goals of some people in her field, were being denied permission to be built for questionable reasons right here at home. In order to fix what she noticed as a flaw in the system, she went back to school to become a Urban Planner. She believed that this career would expand her ability to have a wider impact. Roxana completed her Master's Degree at Syracuse University based in Florence, Italy. She graduated with a Masters in Architecture MARCHII degree and she focused her thesis on a social justice community project, which in time would become the foundation of Worldhealer's educational program. Additionally, she attended a Global Studies program in Fulda, Germany and earned specializations in strategic planning, global management, marketing and international communication, sustainable development and financial resource management. She also holds a certification as an IFC Accredited Life Coach.

Soon after graduation is when she founded Worldhealer, Inc. It's original mission was to help provide assistance to developing global communities by improving poor infrastructure and dilapidated habitable spaces. What she discovered was that a community will not mobilize if the people do not understand how the proposed improvements will benefit them. Individuals within that community must feel pride and ownership of their surroundings to accept help and want to develop their own drive for a better life and environment. This led to the educational programs that she developed to teach those living there about the history, beauty and value of their community. This empowered them to want to improve their lives and protect their surroundings, gave them a voice in the direction they wanted to grow themselves and their community, and pay it forward to others in their community.

## **City of Santa Barbara's Planning Commission**

In 2020, Roxana was appointed to the City of Santa Barbara's Planning Commission. Here, she could help support excellent architectural design, housing development, and guidance in the physical development of the City through zoning, building, land use, redevelopment, conservation, proposed public works, and related matters as may be prescribed by ordinance not inconsistent with the City Charter, and make recommendations to City Council for amendments to the Zoning Ordinance.



Last year, Roxana worked towards establishing an amendment to the City's Santa Barbara Municipal Code (SBMC) enforcement ordinance that brings into compliance buildings and properties that are found to be in violation of the City's planning and building codes. Disagreements took place amongst the seven planning commissioners, resulting in a continuance. During the extension period, a sub-committee was formed to evaluate the direction they wanted to go and create multiple options of draft language for the Planning Commissioners to discuss and vote on. This resulted in a conclusion that satisfied the majority of the Planning Commissioners and the recommended draft language was sent to City Council to be adopted into the SBMC. During this time, Roxana made direct contributions to the Zoning Ordinance that affect the people in her community.

Roxana has also made decisions that more directly affect the greater public within Santa Barbara. One project that was heard by the Planning Commission in 2021 was for the development of Ortega Park in Santa Barbara. While the proposal sounded great at first, including a swimming pool, skatepark, soccer fields, and more, Roxana came to understand and pointed out the discriminatory factors attributed by the plan. As proposed, the project would require participants of the park to purchase memberships or be part of teams to use each section of the complex. Due to the location of the park, a lot of people directly living in the area would not be able to afford a membership or use the park.

This would take away the land for the neighbors to freely access for every day activities such as walking their dogs, having picnics, and playing soccer without having to buy a membership. Instead of voting to support this project, she fought for more open space for people to access freely and encouraged a new, more inclusive design to come forth before approving the project

Roxana is also an architectural and land-use planning practitioner for her company called Power Planning Services, LLC. Here, Roxana provides guidance on how to modify one's property to accommodate the regulations within the jurisdiction the property is located in. Her personal commitment to her clients is to find pathways to permitting while encouraging the integrity and creativity of beautiful architecture. Her services help people develop their dream home, and to develop projects without taking away any artistic or structural value that it may have. Also, she helps people that do not have permitted development on their property to bring their properties up to code in the easiest and most cost-effective ways possible.

## **A Legacy is Born**



Growing up multicultural and especially due to using Roxana's time abroad, she fell in love with experiencing different cultures, and became determined to share this experience with as many people as possible. She felt that these experiences not only made her a better person, but could also benefit a lot of people whose voices go unheard, or those who lack this type of educational experience. In 2008, Roxana began a nonprofit called Worldhealer, Inc. Although Worldhealer was born with the goal to give voices to Cuban people who do not otherwise have civil rights under their socialist government, she was unable to serve Cuba due to legal restrictions from the United States.

Thus, Worldhealer instead began as an international organization, promoting community development in Brazil, Paraguay, and Thailand. With these locations, Roxana could help international communities form leadership, academic, and cultural awareness while improving their living environments.

Locally, Worldhealer also established itself in Santa Barbara, and the organization began to make a name for itself. Roxana then introduced her nonprofit at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB). Starting in 2009, she began recruiting students to help run her nonprofit, as well as provide students an opportunity to gain valuable work experience. The interns, in turn, launched a club on campus to promote global awareness at UCSB, thus the Global Awareness Club was born. Meetings were held in UCSB's Student Resource Building, and new members frequently got involved. Ever since, Worldhealer has earned several community awards and in 2012, Worldhealer received their first Youth Making Change Grant from the Fund for Santa Barbara. This grant allowed Worldhealer to begin its first Teen Global Awareness Program.

In the early years of Worldhealer, Roxana made ends meet with a teaching job, as an English Instructor at an International Language School, however, in 2014 an opportunity to work for the County of Santa Barbara as a Architectural Review Planner presented itself and she was unable to let this unique chance pass. Given this lifestyle shift, she felt that it would be best to limit Worldhealer's location to only Santa Barbara so that she could supervise the work directly. This kept organizational management more efficient, given her busy schedule of an 8am-5pm office job.

To this day, Worldhealer continues to provide internship opportunities for young adults, and the organization has expanded into three committees: Communications, Academic, and Fund Development. Here, everyone completes different projects, practicing a variety of skills, while promoting Worldhealer's mission of cultural awareness. Within Roxana's training process with new members, she provides a self development and empowerment workshop series, which even includes the Myers Briggs test in a positive manner. The goal of the new member training is to encourage each member to discover their own purpose while teaching them to find their voice and lead with confidence.





## COVID Experience

It's safe to say that everyone is aware of the COVID-19 pandemic that significantly influenced the entire world. Fortunately, Worldhealer was able to work through COVID-19, and even set up a system that has made the organization more efficient. The summer of 2020, just after the time that schools and workplaces shut down, Worldhealer held its biggest recruitment session to date. 84 students applied to become a part of Worldhealer's leadership program and internship. Given the reduced staff resulting from COVID-19, they could only manage assigning three new members per mentee, thus Worldhealer accepted 30 new members at that time. Now, with the use of Zoom, people within the organization can meet anytime, and anywhere. This, along with using a shared Google Drive for online work, has allowed projects to be completed faster and more efficiently while encouraging more effective teamwork. Also, using Zoom has also allowed Worldhealer to continue presenting its academic and leadership workshops online which provided Worldhealer the opportunity to thrive in otherwise restrictive conditions. Worldhealer has maintained a team of approximately 20-30 members and continues to effectively function online.

Worldhealer continues to benefit both the community as well as the people who run it:

**“Worldhealer has allowed me to practice a long list of skills, and build connections with amazing people.”**

- Zach Malchus, Worldhealer Member

## Roxana's personal and organizational awards

## **It Doesn't End There**

Roxana hopes that as a City Planning Commissioner and through her work with Power Planning Services LLC, that she can influence positive change and be a voice for those who do not feel heard or prioritized while doing good work for the development of the community. She also plans to continue to support a master planning effort to create a pedestrian friendly downtown city center for the City of Santa Barbara through her role on the City's State Street Advisory Committee which will have a positive impact on the future of her beloved city. As for Worldhealer, she will continue to be a mentor for college students and young adults, as well as K-12 students, by promoting leadership, emotional intelligence, cultural knowledge, and empowerment. One day, Roxana hopes to implement a self-sustaining financial system to afford the latest software, and a steady sustainable income to all Worldhealer staff to guarantee the longevity of the organization. She also strives to inspire change and confidence to the participants of Worldhealer so that in time, they will be the advocates of change to improve workplace environments, politics, and make significant positive impacts in all areas of the world.

In every aspect of her work and daily life, Roxana strives to bring unfairness, injustice, discrimination and inequality to the surface and find ways to solve these issues in the areas that she is active in. She recognizes that fighting for what she believes to be right takes courage and may not always result in the outcome that she aims for, even making her unpopular in some arenas. In the end, standing up for ethical behavior, equality and justice, and empowering others to do the same, is who she is at her core. She reminds everyone that she meets to stand up for what they believe in and helps empower them, even if their goals do not align with hers. As she says, the most important thing is to put your money where your mouth is and when we disagree is when we should listen the most.

As of September 2021, Roxana has added motherhood to her long repertoire of experiences and as a proud mother, she plans to pass on her enthusiasm for life, passion for adventure, and civically engaged mindset down to her daughter.