



Cage fight, mom?; A Forest Hill socialite shares her love of 'blood and gore' ultimate fighting by opening a new gym in the upscale neighbourhood

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Joe O'Connor

Rachelle Bronfman swears she can't be having a mid-life crisis. Even after doing a few quick calculations and realizing, with a gasp, that she is indeed 49 years old and in prime mid-life crisis territory she dismisses the theory as an utter impossibility.

"I can't be having a mid-life crisis," she says. "I drive a Cadillac. Isn't that like an old person's car, like my dad had?"

Ms. Bronfman is correct: a Caddy, and hers is white, is an old person's car. So she can't be having a crisis, and so it must be something else, since something is definitely not right.

Ms. Bronfman, see, is married to a Bronfman, of Seagram's fame and unfathomable fortune. She is building a house in Forest Hill with 10 bathrooms. She does philanthropic work for hospital foundations, Jewish associations and the homeless, has three lovely children, a loving husband and kindly-looking brown eyes.

On her right wrist, there is a thick diamond bracelet. On her wedding finger, a chunky diamond ring. And on her head is a black hat -- with the letters UFC -- that complicates the portrait of the polite society lady.

UFC is better known as the Ultimate Fighting Championship, a blood and gore mixed-martial arts fighting franchise that is decidedly unladylike and outlawed in Ontario.

UFC features cage fights where combatants pummel one another using a blend of techniques, such as boxing, wrestling, judo, jiu-jitsu and more. It appeals to a testosterone-soaked crowd plus, it turns out, a mother of three from Forest Hill with kindly brown eyes.

"I guess I have a bit of a split-personality problem," Ms. Bronfman says with a laugh.

She didn't always. But after years of joining gyms, and never going, Ms. Bronfman enlisted Erez Cohen to be her personal trainer about 24 months ago. A judo expert and former commando in a crack Israeli anti-terrorist unit, Mr. Cohen taught his client how to be fit, how to fight, and how graceful a seemingly brutal spectacle like a UFC bout could be.

To demonstrate, Mr. Cohen showed Ms. Bronfman Youtube clips of cage matches, breaking down the fighters' techniques. She enjoyed the tutorials so much she started watching fights on her own time. That was only the beginning.

Five months ago Ms. Bronfman opened the Powerclub, an upscale Forest Hill gym with a mixed-martial arts component, a former Israeli commando as a part owner, and a private entrance at the back. Members pay \$95 an hour for a personal training session.

"If you don't have somebody to point out what is actually going on in a UFC fight, you might just think it is like two little boys rolling around on the ground, and then somebody gets all bloody and that's it, it's over," says Ms. Bronfman, seated on a red sofa in the lounge in the gym.

"I like the fact that these guys could actually kill each other. They could actually break arms, break bones and sometimes they do, but they have self-control. What they do is a discipline. Everything is a technique. It is not just two guys trying to beat each other to the ground."

Ms. Bronfman offers a confession about going to a bar, and, more than once, with her UFC cap pulled down low over her eyes, finding a dark corner to watch the latest UFC pay-per-view bout amid a bunch of howling men. Her spouse does not join her for these outings.

"My husband doesn't really like watching it," she says. "He rides his bike, and he loves going for walks."

Her daughters, meanwhile, think she is "crazy," and are a little bit embarrassed by the pink hand wraps -- for boxing-- that Ms. Bronfman carts around in her purse. Her girlfriends simply avoid the subject, since she does not talk about it, and they probably would not get it anymore than her girls do.

That leaves Ms. Bronfman's youngest child, Herschel. Herschel is eight. Herschel thinks his Mom is "cool," although her coolness has limits. If the Bronfman heir aspires to be a UFC star, he would have to meet some conditions first.

"He'd have to have a dentist or a doctor's degree and go to Harvard," Ms. Bronfman says. "But other than that, I'd be fine with it."

She would also be OK with Dalton McGuinty's government legalizing mixed-marital arts matches in Ontario.

"I don't get it," she says. "If boxing is here, then why not UFC?"

On a personal note, she says she has never felt stronger, fitter and more full of life. "I never thought I would be able to flip somebody," she says.

Well, that depends on one's perspective. With nothing more to say, it was time for a show.

Ms. Bronfman's boutique gym may lack a cage, but there is a room dedicated to mixed-martial arts training. It has wall-to-wall padding, a couple of heavy bags, and a plastic knife and gun for self-defence exercises.

For her first demonstration, the philanthropist kneed a writer in the ribs four times, flipping him to the mat and twisting his arm to a point where the only prudent option was to say: uncle.

A subsequent duel featured the rubber knife, and a writer being flattened, again, into a helpless heap.

"Now," said Ms. Bronfman, the brawler, the blue blood, the UFC-loving-badass with the kindly brown eyes. "I am going to stab you."