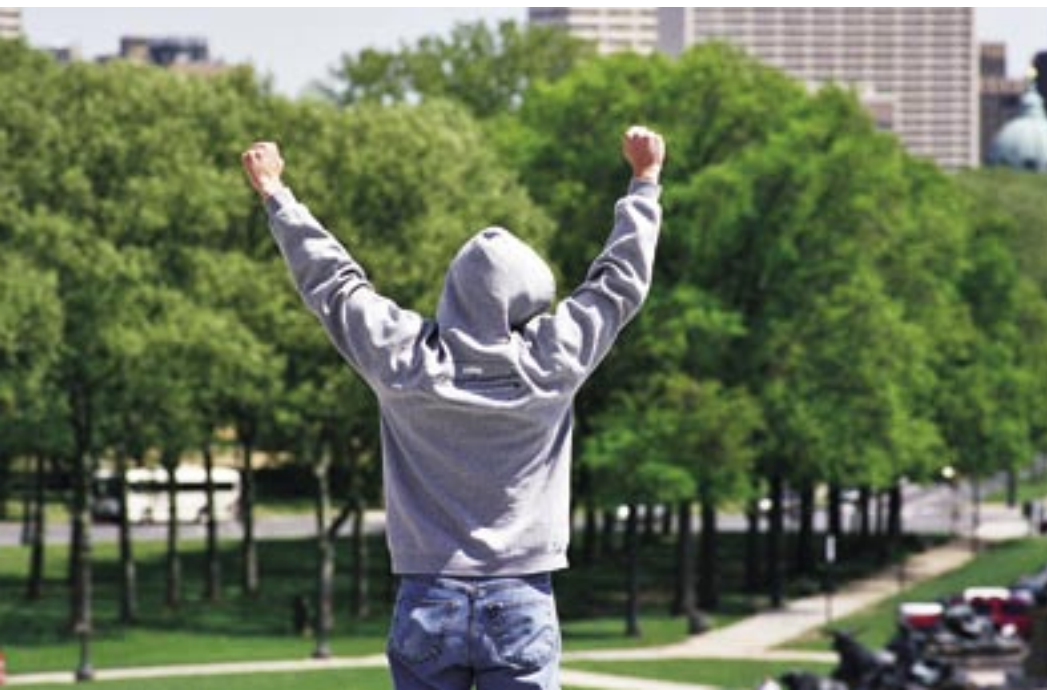




With a
Foreword by
Sylvester Stallone

ROCKY STORIES

Tales of Love, Hope, and Happiness at America's Most Famous Steps **By Michael Vitez** Photographs by Tom Gralish



WHAT THEY'RE SAYING ABOUT ROCKY STORIES

“The Rocky Steps have become a special place for tourists and Philadelphians alike. Virtually everyone who lives here or comes here wants to say that they ran up the Rocky Steps and saw the incredible view down the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. When I was Mayor, the city planned twenty-four hours of millennium celebrations, one each hour. Of course, we had to kick it off at the Rocky Steps, and we did so with two thousand people all dressed like Rocky running up the steps at the same time. It was awesome.”

– Pennsylvania Governor Edward G. Rendell

“In our increasingly homogenous world of strip malls and chain restaurants, there are still a few authentic and unscripted experiences left. One of them takes place every day on the towering steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where strangers flock from across town and across the globe. Two extraordinarily talented journalists, Michael Vitez and Tom Gralish, have captured this uniquely American phenomenon with whimsy, poignancy, and utter charm. *Rocky Stories* will steal your heart and restore your faith in the power of shared human experience.”

– John Grogan, author of *Marley & Me*

“Combine Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Michael Vitez with Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer Tom Gralish, let them loose on one of the great architectural icons of the modern world and what do you get? A book that is an absolute joy and an absolute blast and quintessentially American in its hopes and dreams and sweetness.”

– Buzz Bissinger, author of *Friday Night Lights* and *A Prayer for the City*

“I ran the steps holding the hopes and dreams of the entire nation in my right hand. With each stride I heard my name, and with each breath felt pride. When I finally lit the cauldron with the flame from the Olympic torch, I knew I had arrived. Michael Vitez and Tom Gralish have brought to life the many amazing and beautiful personal stories from Philadelphia’s art museum steps. The Rocky Steps finally have a voice.”

– Dawn Staley, Olympic gold-medalist and Temple University women’s basketball coach (on carrying the Olympic torch up the Rocky Steps on its way to the 1996 games in Atlanta)

“*Rocky Stories* captures the sprawling complexity of life. It’s a delight.”

– Mark Bowden, author of *Black Hawk Down* and *Guests of the Ayatollah*



In *Rocky Stories*, Michael Vitez and Tom Gralish offer fifty-two profiles of “Rocky runners.” If you’ve run the Rocky Steps, visit www.RockyStories.com and share your *Rocky* story with us.

ROCKY STORIES

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By Michael Vitez

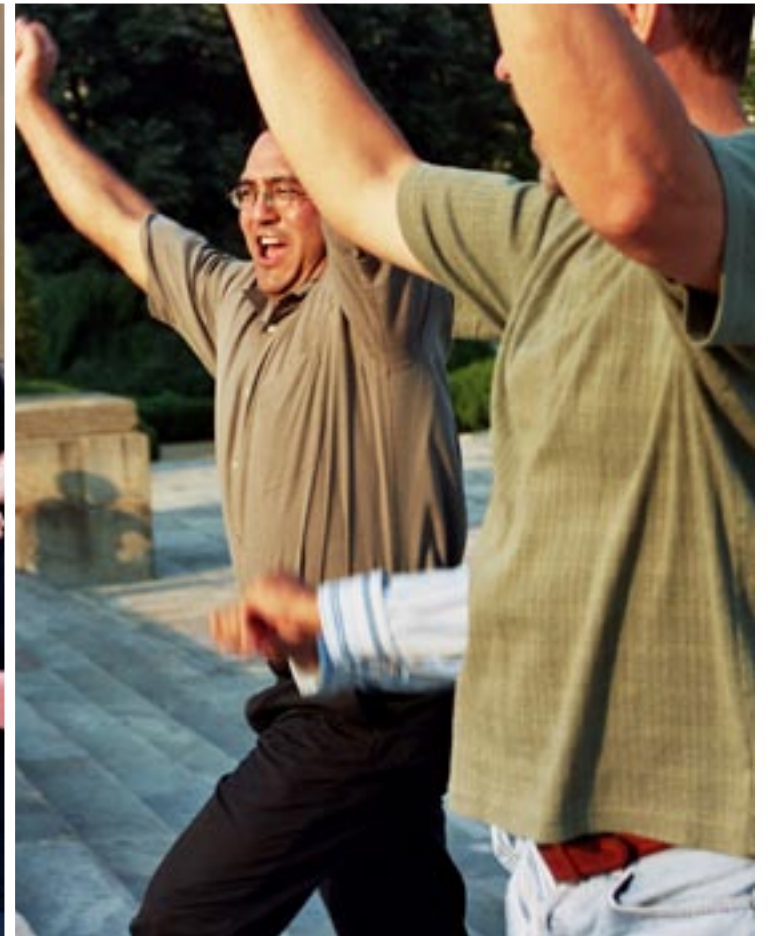
Photographs by Tom Gralish

Foreword by Sylvester Stallone



PAUL DRY BOOKS

Philadelphia 2006



MY YEAR AT THE STEPS

★ (From the Introduction by Michael Vitez)

One day recently, a taxi pulled up to the curb in front of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. A man hopped out and started running up the steps. A woman jumped out after him and began filming him. He sprinted to the top, turned to face the city below, and danced and pranced and thrust his fists into the air in celebration, just as if he were Sylvester Stallone in the film *Rocky*. The man then ran back down the steps, hugged his girl in jubilation, and together, arm-in-arm, they skipped—skipped—back to their taxicab and drove off.

I reached them just as the cab was pulling away.

Where are you from?

“England,” said the man.

How long have you wanted to do this?

“All my life.”

This kind of thing happens all the time, every day of the year. From throughout the Philadelphia region, the nation, and the world, people are drawn to these steps to run them as Rocky did. The movie premiered in 1976, thirty years ago, yet they still come—a high-school track team from Belfast, three bus loads of professional wrestling fans from Australia, a college rower from Maine, a librarian and her fiancé from Lake Tahoe, two best friends who grew up in Oklahoma, a race car driver (he ran the steps for good luck). These are all people I met at the steps. The story of *Rocky* inspired them, stirred them, and they felt they had to come here, like their movie hero, and share this literal and cinematic high.

Mark Glazier, a welder from British Columbia, ran the steps

with a tear in his eye. “Everybody knows what it is that brings you here,” he told me. “It’s the feeling, man. You come here for the feeling, that you can accomplish something, that anybody can accomplish anything they want with hard work. I’ve wanted to come here for many years.”

No scene in the movie is more symbolic, more powerful, or more enduring than the one at the art museum steps. Early in the movie, Rocky sets out on a training run, but he is so out of shape that, by the time he reaches the art museum, he can’t even jog to the top of the steps. He has to walk. Near the end of the movie, however, on the eve of the big fight, he tries again, . . . racing up the museum steps at dawn, taking them three and four steps at a time, celebrating with a spirit and verve that still draws throngs to that very spot, in real life, three decades later. At the top he spins and dances and thrusts his fists into the air, an action and gesture for which I have coined the verb *to rocky*. He isn’t celebrating victory; this scene takes place the day before the fight. He is celebrating something more important—how far he’s come in life. The steps become a symbol of his journey, his triumph—our triumph.

. . . And because of a remarkable serendipity of architecture, history, and cinema, the people can come to this spot and bring that dream to life. They don’t have to have much in common with Rocky; they may not even especially like the movie. But the sense of joy, self-expression, and hope that everyone feels as he or she celebrates on the steps is unmistakable and undeniable, even if it lasts for only a little while.

**“PEOPLE CAN COME
TO THIS SPOT
AND BRING THAT
DREAM TO LIFE.”**

44 A LEAGUE OF HER OWN

★ Marika was quite the sight, lugging her bags and camera up the steps. But she knew what she wanted, went after it, and savored every moment of her adventure. She struck me as someone whose life was not particularly easy, but she was a “glass-half-full” woman. And like so many of the runners I met, she invited me to visit her home—in Australia.

Marika Forras was a single mother, raising a young son in the suburbs of Melbourne, Australia. She volunteered in her spare time working with underprivileged children, and she took a group to see a game in the Australian Baseball League.

She met a man there (now a scout for the Atlanta Braves). He told her to get her son started playing baseball, a great sport. She began taking him to tee-ball at eight o'clock on Sunday mornings. Her son really liked baseball; she fell in love with it.

An advertisement for a new women's baseball league prompted Marika to sign up. Her Austrian mother had been an Olympic skier, her father a member of the Hungarian Olympic team. She'd never swung a bat or thrown a pitch, but at age thirty-three, she became a first baseman for the Port Melbourne Mariners. About that time, she also started a new

job, working the night shift as a reservations operator with Quantas, the Australian airline.

As the years went by and her love of baseball grew, she made a promise to herself: If she worked for ten years with Quantas and received her three-month paid leave, and if she were still playing baseball then, “I'm going to fulfill my dream of seeing a baseball game in every major league park in America.”

She had to begin planning years ahead. She teamed up with an American friend and baseball player, Debbie Pierson of Oregon. Deb feared that Marika, accustomed to driving on the left side of the road in Australia, would never make it on American roads, so she offered to do the driving. The two women eventually traveled more than twelve thousand miles in Deb's fifteen-year-old Honda Civic—with no air conditioning.

Although it had taken Marika years to save the money and

make her plans, the minute she walked into Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles, she knew she had made the right choice. “This was a dream come true,” she said.

Not only did Marika take in all the ballparks, she also met players, coaches, and fans. She toured museums, parks, historic sites. “The people have been fantastic. They take me into their hearts,” she said. “I'm the envy of most Americans because it's their pastime and their game, and I'm an Aussie and I'm doing it.”

Near the end of her trip, her twenty-seventh of thirty games, Marika arrived in Philadelphia. She has long been a *Rocky* fan,

**“RUNNING THE
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and knew the one thing she just had to do in this city. “Running the *Rocky* Steps means you have accomplished something,” she said. “This tour of mine has been a mammoth adventure. Running the steps was a chance to revel in the fact that I could overcome anything that was put in front of me.”

Marika ran slowly. She was weighed down with shopping bags and carried a video camera to record herself as she ran. She sang the *Rocky* theme song as she ascended, and she talked to herself, reminding herself to take it slow, that she could do it. She “rockied” at the top.

“As I ran the steps, I was thinking that life could not get any better, and I could not believe that I was actually doing this. When I reached the top, I was exhilarated and wished that my son and close friends were with me to enjoy the moment. I had conquered my mountain, and turning around to see the beautiful city of Philadelphia, I thought to myself how lucky I had been in life to experience moments such as this.”





51 THE PROPOSAL

★ I never knew what would happen at the steps, or when. I think I was just as surprised as the bride when the proposal came. “Oh my God,” I thought. “He’s on one knee!” I watched quietly, along with all the tourists who had figured out what was going on, before I approached the newly engaged couple.

Eric Williams fell in love with Julie Reeb in the summer of 2002 when she joined him working behind the bar at the Lyon Oaks Golf Club in suburban Detroit. It took Eric nearly a year to gather the nerve to ask Julie out, but after just one date, they became inseparable.

Eric, a special-education teacher, has had a best friend since kindergarten, Alex Baker, who lived with his wife, Kristin, in Philadelphia. When Eric and Julie decided to visit Alex and Kristen there for New Year’s, Eric had an ulterior motive: six months before, he had decided he would propose marriage to Julie at the top of the Rocky Steps.

“We both love the *Rocky* movies,” he said, “and I knew the scenery would be a great backdrop to a perfect moment.” He also knew “she would never think that I would do it there.” And to make certain that Julie wouldn’t see a proposal coming, Eric told her three weeks before Christmas not to expect

a ring. He just didn’t have the money.

On the last afternoon of the year, they “just happened” to be driving past the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The six in the car—Eric and Julie, Alex and Kristin, and Alex’s brother and sister-in-law, Max and Tammy—were all in on the plan except, of course, for Julie.

“Let’s run the steps!” suggested Eric.

Julie responded honestly: “Oh, we’re not going to run, are we?” She had watched the *Rocky* movies countless times with Eric, but it was nearly two o’clock, and they hadn’t eaten all day. She was hungry.

They parked the car, and as everyone walked toward the steps, Eric began singing, “Eye of the Tiger,” the anthem from *Rocky III*. “We were singing to pump us up to run the steps, just like Rocky used the song to pump himself up for the fight against Clubber Lang,” Eric recounted.

As he ran the steps, Eric had a lot on his mind. He was hoping he wouldn’t fall or run out of breath. (Alex had even joked that he should bend down and act like he was short of breath after the run, to throw off any suspicions, but Eric rejected that idea.) He was also hoping with all his might for one more thing: that Julie would say “Yes.”

The six of them ran up the steps in the brilliant sunshine. They looked like so many others, just having fun, enjoying the moment. Then Eric dropped to his knee, right near the Rocky footprints. He opened a small jewelry box to reveal a diamond ring glinting in the sun.

“Oh, my God!” was Julie’s reaction. She was clutching her small

**“WE’RE NOT
GOING TO RUN,
ARE WE?”**

pink purse.

“Will you marry me?” Eric asked.

Their friends were all point-

ing cameras, snapping away. Julie was confused, almost stunned. Eric slipped the ring on her finger, then tears rolled down her cheeks.

“I’m like so shocked right now,” was all she could think to say.

Finally, Alex had to know: “So what is your answer?”

Julie, as you might expect, had been so blown away that she couldn’t respond, but she regained her wits and let out an emphatic “Yes!”

Eric stood up and kissed his new fiancée. Everything had worked out perfectly, the setting, the surprise, the answer. “I think Julie really brings out this compassion in him,” Alex said later. “She hasn’t changed him, but only brought out the best in him. You could say that Adrian brought out the best of Rocky.”

You could say the Rocky Steps bring out the best in people.

Let’s hope they always will.



POPULAR CULTURE / PHOTOGRAPHY

“*Rocky Stories* will steal your heart and restore your faith in the power of shared human experience.”

– John Grogan, author of *Marley & Me*

“A book that is an absolute joy and an absolute blast and quintessentially American in its hopes and dreams and sweetness.”

– Buzz Bissinger, author of *Friday Night Lights* and *A Prayer for the City*



Pulitzer Prize-winners Michael Vitez and Tom Gralish of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* spent a year visiting the Philadelphia Museum of Art to capture the stories of “Rocky runners,” who come from all over the world to run up America’s most famous steps—just as Sylvester Stallone did in *Rocky*. People make the pilgrimage to mark a new beginning, to seek inspiration, to celebrate an accomplishment, to find the perfect backdrop for romance, or simply because they love the movie. As one runner says, “It gives you the feeling that anything is possible.”



“You can’t borrow Superman’s cape. You can’t use the Jedi laser sword. But the steps are there. The steps are accessible. And standing up there, you kind of have a piece of the *Rocky* pie.”

– from the Foreword by Sylvester Stallone



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