

SPECIALIST 22  
russian heritage week

# Movers & Shakers

*Behind any great community, there are exceptional people. Here's a sampling of Russian-speaking New Yorkers who have made a difference*

## Marina Kovalyov & Rina Kirshner Mother-Daughter Powerhouse

Marina Kovalyov and her daughter, Rina Kirshner, as the marketing, public relations and production duo of the Russian-American Arts Foundation, have made enormous strides in promoting cross-cultural ventures between the U.S. and the states of the former Soviet Union. They helped coordinate the first NYANA Festival six years ago and were the force in making the festival the pivotal event of the first Russian Heritage Week.

Noteworthy other projects have included the Russian New Year Gala at Radio City Music Hall, the exhibition "Treasures of the Last Russian Emperor," showcasing crafts by artisans of the Russian Empire, pre-1917, and the Moscow Arts Festival on Broadway, for which they won a Drama Desk Award for producing.

Working together came naturally. Kirshner studied multi-national management and international relations at the Wharton Business School. "My mother is an entrepreneur," she says. "I always knew I would be running my own business. But, I knew I could only get a certain set of skills by going to school."

Kovalyov's skills were more self-taught. She emigrated in 1979 from St. Petersburg with her daughter and grandparents. Her first priority was to learn the language.

She delights in telling a story, which introduced her to the Russian community here and inspired her to help other new immigrants. "While I was in English class, my grandmother visited the local synagogue in Jackson Heights," she recalls. "Grandmother announced later that a family would help furnish our apartment. When a mirror and a beautiful rug arrived,

I insisted that we thank the family. Hence, I learned to dial long distance, 516 area code, and the kind family invited us to their home in Great Neck. During our visit, my grandfather, a former concert pianist, sat at our host's piano and basically gave a grand performance. A week later this generous family presented grandfather with a Yamaha grand piano."

Kovalyev believes the gift added 10 years to her grandfather's life.

The gift also rooted a generous spirit within her which prompted her participation in the UJA's Russian Division and the Shorefront Y. "These directly help other Russian immigrants getting started in New York," she notes.

Her office on Madison Avenue overflows with mementos and awards, Russian nesting dolls and icons, a rolodex spilling with numbers spanning the globe, photographs with former Mayor Giuliani and other dignitaries, and family photos of her daughter's wedding, and of her new grandson.

"I met my future husband [Ricky Kirshner] at Radio City Music Hall," Rina says. "He was producing the Tony Awards, my mother and I were producing a Russian gala. First we had to work out a scheduling conflict between the two events, and soon thereafter, we worked out details of our wedding at the Hudson Theater."

Since then she has partnered with her husband on events, ranging from the Muscular Dystrophy Telethon, to the Teamsters Convention in Las Vegas, to the opening of the St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital in Memphis. "I have the world's two best teachers at work: my mother and my husband," she says.

—Vanessa Baran



JOAN ROTH  
**DYNAMIC DUO:** Kovalyov (r.) and Kirshner are president and vice president, respectively, of the Russian-American Arts Foundation.