

The Producer

Producer and manager Emily Gerson Saines mixes her career and her life's work for her new HBO film.

When Cynthia Nixon accepted the Best Actress Tony Award for her performance in *Rabbit Hole*, there were only three people she mentioned by name: the playwright, the director, and Emily Gerson Saines. Nixon took extra time to point out Gerson Saines's "unfailing intelligence and unwavering devotion for the last fifteen years."

Gerson Saines, a resident of Larchmont, represents Nixon at her boutique management company, Brookside Artist Management, a business she founded after years as an agent at William Morris Agency. She has no reservations about admitting that she felt an immediate connection to *Rabbit Hole*—also about a family in Larchmont—and pushing Nixon to take the part. "I read this play, and I wept," she says. "It affected me so profoundly that I would not take no for an answer from Cynthia."

Then again, there's another reason that the play may have struck a cord with Gerson Saines. "The play is about a family who lost a child because a ball rolled in the street and a young driver hit the child with his car," she says. "It affected me so because I also mourned a life that my son was never going to have, and that we as a family were never going to have." While thankfully not the victim of a car accident, her son was diagnosed with autism at the age of 2½, setting Gerson Saines on a path of autism activism and advocacy. And this month, the two sides of her—her experiences with autism and her career in the entertainment industry—come together with the HBO premiere of *Temple*

Grandin, a film she produced about an innovative woman with autism who used her unique perspective on the world to revolutionize the livestock industry.

Temple Grandin is a project that's been a decade in the making. Before she'd ever heard of *Grandin*, Gerson Saines worked her way up to vice president at the William Morris Agency, representing actors such as Robert Downey, Jr., Scarlett Johansson, and Angelina Jolie (finding her the role in *Girl, Interrupted* that won her an Oscar). It was around that time that her second son was diagnosed with autism. "Those were very, very dark early days," she says. "I was so down because I'd never felt hopeless before. I went to bed and didn't necessarily believe the next day was going to be a better day. We didn't have schooling. At that time, we had no idea what we were doing. We had no network of people to talk to. No one really knew what autism was and no one knew how to treat it. We were *persona non grata* everywhere we went. I'd go to the supermarket and people would yell at me, 'Can't you control your child?'"

Gerson Saines eventually found salvation when her school district supported her son attending the Devereux Millwood Learning Center in Millwood, where she met other parents of children with autism. A few of the parents she met—including Kevin Murray and Rita Bigelow of Rye and James Schwab of Briarcliff—wondered that there was not enough autism advocacy coming out of New York. Together, they formed the Autism Coalition for Research and Education to unite the autism community to fund biomedical research, education, and awareness for autism. It didn't hurt that they could act as a support group for each other. Gerson Saines describes one harrowing day when her son ran out of her house, naked, and into the street, stopping traffic in both directions. She retrieved him to the sounds of horns honking and people shouting about her apparent lack of parenting skills.

"I had this brainstorm," she said. "I'd decided to put locks—key locks—on the inside of my door. I was going to lock my son *in* the house. Then, when I went to Kevin Murray's house for the first time when we were starting the Autism Coalition, I remember looking up at their house, and on their doors, they had key locks on the inside. It was a complete release. Tears were streaming down my face. I thought, 'I am no longer alone.' It was one of the best days of my life."



PHOTO COURTESY OF HBO

The Autism Coalition went on to raise millions of dollars through golf tournaments and other fundraisers. “Emily engulfs you with enthusiasm and persistence,” says Murray, president of the Pilgrim Foresight Fund and now executive board member of Autism Speaks. “It’s hard to say no.”

Her fundraising prowess caught the attention of Bob Wright, former chairman of NBC Universal, and his wife, Suzanne, whose grandchild had been diagnosed with autism and who were looking to unite all the local autism groups into a single, national campaign. They offered to make the Autism Coalition for Research and Education the first organization to be part of the newly created Autism Speaks, and Gerson Saines was happy to let them do so. “If you’ve ever tried to raise an autistic child, it’s a full-time job,” she says.

It was in those early, chaotic days that Gerson Saines first heard of Temple Grandin. Her mother sent her Grandin’s books, *Emergence* and *Thinking in Pictures*, and her grandmother independently sent her an article about Grandin. The books, as well as the film, explain how Grandin’s autism gave her a unique way of looking at the world, which ultimately lead her to a greater understanding of the behavior of livestock. She was able to use that information to design cattle feed lots and slaughterhouses that melded better with the cattle’s natural instincts, making them easier on the cattle as well as their handlers. “All of a sudden, I had this source of hope,” Gerson Saines says. “I thought maybe with a good education and good mentoring, my son could learn to read, write, talk, be a productive member of society, and maybe even discover something that no one else had discovered—and this could actually be a gift.”

The first step, though, was convincing Grandin to allow her story to be told. “I called her agent and asked if she would meet me for lunch,” Gerson Saines says. “It was kind of hilarious because you read that her life has been dedicated to the humane treatment of animals, and the first thing she did was sit down and order a steak. She came in wearing her cowgirl shirt—in her very Temple way, in her very Temple walk. I realized that there were people staring at her, and in a different lifetime I might have been one of them, but all I could think of was, ‘I can’t believe how lucky I am to be here. This woman’s my hero.’” Grandin had heard of Gerson Saines’s work with the Autism Coalition and gave her permission.



Neighbor

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Still, it took 10 years to make the film. "It never really occurred to me that it could take ten years," she says. "I had mentioned the movie to a few friends I had in the world of autism, and then I eventually stopped talking about it because I realized that they're never going to believe that this movie is ever really going to happen."

The project started out with another Westchester native, David O. Russell, director of *Three Kings* and *I Heart Huckabees*, at the helm, but he eventually dropped out—and his departure led to them tossing out the script they had and starting from scratch. "Emily's vision of the film, her relationship with Temple, and her sheer tenacity kept the project alive," says Len Amato, president of HBO Films.

When it came time to find a home for the film, Gerson Saines had only one place in mind: HBO. "I've had a relationship with HBO forever," she says. "I put Cynthia Nixon in *Sex and the City*, I put Michael Imperioli in *The Sopranos*, and I represented Angelina Jolie and we did the whole *Gia* journey together. But I also knew that by going that route, more people will see it. When you're trying to make a movie like this, it's very rare that it reaches a wide audience."

Luckily, HBO was an extremely willing home. "In *Temple Grandin*, we saw the opportunity to explore a character and a world which we felt had never fully been represented on screen before," says Amato. "For HBO, it's a terrific and entertaining story that we think people will enjoy."

At least one person did enjoy it: Temple Grandin. Gerson Saines took her to the last day of shooting, and showed her lots of daily footage. "She loved the dailies," Gerson Saines says, "and she actually cried. I don't know how much crying she's done in her life."

For now, Gerson Saines has settled back into her life in Larchmont with her husband, two sons, now 16 and 18, and her dog, as well as her role at Brookside Artist Management, managing clients like Hayden Panettiere, Kristen Bell, Famke Janssen, and the Culkin family—and often setting up her clients to follow in her path. "Now that I've done some producing, I set my clients up to produce," she says. "I've also encouraged most of my clients to affiliate themselves with a charity, whether it was building their own charities or partnering them with different charities that suit their interests."

Temple Grandin, which stars Claire Danes, will debut on HBO on February 6. 