

Here's how one of Kripalu's leaders went from managing Alicia Keys to leading transformational leadership retreats in the Berkshires

By Aaron Simon Gross, The Berkshire Eagle



"It was to reclaim the essence and lineage of the ashram and bring this work of wellness and wholebeing and liberation to a wider audience," Eset Rose said, on why she came to Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health.

STEPHANIE ZOLLSHAN — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

This story was made possible by contributions made to the Local Journalism Fund.

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STOCKBRIDGE — On her first day working at Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health, in the summer of 2019, Eset Rose stood by a statue of Ganesha, the Hindu God of beginnings.

“Why did you bring me here?” she says she called out, a couple hundred feet from the office where, at 39, she had her first 9-to-5 job.

As a Black woman — Rose calls herself "a Jewmaican" — used to the diversity of the music industry, she was hyperaware of being in a largely white space. In another life, Rose had been Alicia Keys' manager and creative director, as well as the president of her production company AK Worldwide. Why, she wondered, had she applied to be director of luminary programming at a wellness retreat center in Western Massachusetts?

Just then, standing on the ridge line before her, she had a vision of ancestral members of the Stockbridge-Munsee tribe. The physicalized figures answered her in chorus: “We feel disconnected from the land. It’s your job to increase access. To bring more people here.”

Or at least that's how Rose experienced it. Still, she was uncowed. Because she's experienced her "psychic gift" — including clairaudience, clairsentience, claircognizance and clairvoyance — for virtually her entire life.

Even at 2 years old, Rose told her mom and dad that she'd died in a previous life and then, in heaven, had to choose between three sets; she picked hers, she said, because she thought she'd be best for them.

In the years before she came to Kripalu, Rose's spirituality tugged at her.

There was the trip to Egypt in her 30s when, during an initiation to be a priestess of Isis, she was guided to change her first name from “Erika” to “Eset.”

“I’m an eccentric woo-woo lady, but I was deeply like, 'PLEEEASE, I can't change my name, that's too weird, I'm not that girl,’” Rose, now 43, said in a recent interview with *The Eagle*. “And the higher voices were like, ‘No. You are.’”

The name Erika’s biblical meaning is “bold ruler,” a title she’d lived up to in her industry.

“I think she worked harder than anyone I’ve ever met,” said Ty Stiklorius, a music executive who manages John Legend and Charlie Puth. “She was a very good manager, kind of nonstop.”

But Rose had never planned to be a high-powered executive. Growing up in Florida, she dreamed of being a singer.

Throughout her childhood, she often visited her uncle, a percussionist with Miles Davis and The Jacksons, in New York City. She loved hanging out with the kids in his artist’s housing, one of whom was Keys.

Rose’s uncle and Keys’ mother were tight, and the two little girls clicked as well. They met at 4 years old, staying close as they grew up.

Rose was a University of Miami freshman when Keys got a record deal and invited her to be with her in the studio. There, the two co-wrote the song “A Woman’s Worth,” which ended up on Keys’ debut album “Songs in A Minor,” released in 2001.

Rose's post-graduation plan was to move to New York, get her own record deal and release an album. But just around graduation, she heard from Keys: Just as she was heading on her first world tour, her assistant had bailed. Could Rose help out and hang on the road?

“Three weeks turned into six weeks turned into the road manager having to leave for a family issue,” Rose said. She ended up staying as the road manager.

Just a month into the tour, Keys' album won five Grammy Awards.

“And my whole life changed,” Rose said.

She'd never planned to work on the business side.

“But Alicia's my best friend. She's my sister. And I was just like, okay. Life and fate and destiny have had it that all of a sudden she's 'Alicia Keys with 10 million records' and I can't leave her. Who's got her back? And so that was that.”

Eventually, after Rose co-wrote on Keys' next album; after Rose and Keys co-founded a charity for HIV-affected communities in Africa; after Rose took a break to release her own solo album, "Rosegarden," she co-founded Keys' production company, AK Worldwide, becoming its president.

“Then it was 24/7/365,” Rose said. Still, a deeper life beckoned.

“Anytime she had a break, which was very rare, she used it to build her toolbox,” Nikki Maizel, Rose's longtime close friend, remembered.

She took courses in farming, agriculture, yoga, reiki healing, clairvoyance, even being a modern-day priestess.

Actually getting to practice these new skills was always on the backburner. When she became Keys' chief manager in 2016. Rose ran into her mother's room holding a physical copy of the Billboard Magazine announcement, weeping, exhausted.

"I'm just climbing this ladder in this way I never intended," she cried. "I don't want this. I never aspired to this."

But she kept going until, while planning a massive Times Square performance, she lost hearing in her left ear.

A doctor told her she had a condition called sudden sensorineural hearing loss; there was a 50/50 chance her hearing would come back. For the first time in 20 years, Rose took time fully off of work.

"I got really quiet, called shaman friends and all I could hear was, 'You're not listening. You're off your path,'" she said. "And it became really clear to me that I had to leave. It was the hardest thing I've ever had to do."

She spent months on bedrest. She got officially initiated on the shamanic path through The Four Winds Society.

Rose was meditating one morning when she heard a voice say, "Time to get a job!"

"A job? I don't want a job," she answered.

"And the voice said, 'Go to Kripalu.' And I said, 'Oh, yes.'"



As Alicia Keys' manager, Eset Rose coordinated between the label and publicist and agent and lawyers and marketing departments and sales teams, so balancing different teams at Kripalu came naturally to her.

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She'd visited a few times over the years, and lived in nearby upstate New York. At the time, she called herself "a luminous liberator," so when she saw Kripalu was hiring for director of luminary programming, she thought, "That must be the job."

After learning her purpose from the land's ancestors, the job came easily to her.

"The work of leadership and team building and creative strategy and having a vision and implementing it? That translates anywhere," she said. Kripalu leadership agreed and in 2021, she became senior director of creative strategy and programming. Her work at Kripalu has been defined by her efforts to expand access, to bring in people from historically marginalized groups as both faculty and guests.

"I don't think the generosity of Eset can be overstated," said Jonathan Hernandez, an actor-filmmaker who participated in a yearlong artists' retreat she hosted there.

Allison Strickland, a painter who participated in the same retreat agreed, "I don't think she comes in with any kind of agenda. She's always very channeled, very good at sharing from the heart."

Sitting in her office on a snowy Tuesday, Rose imagines her space through the eyes of this journalist.

"She has a big buddha, a wolf, was that a whalebone? Yes it was," she says, imagining a description of her office. "It was exactly what you'd think a weirdo like this would like."

Music recording equipment sits on her desk; on Fridays after work, she records lullabies for her kids.

“I think she needed to find out who she is: an unbelievable voice, beautiful, dynamic, otherworldly,” Stiklorius said. “If you’ve ever been in her orbit, you end up a far better person.”

Reflecting on the name change from Erika to Eset, she says, “Erika was very industrious, ambitious. I made miracles happen. Eset is less about doing and more about being. It’s been an invitation to slow down and do less and be more.”

Be more what?

“Magic and love and creativity,” she said, laughing, gesturing at little statues and candles and crystals and scrawls surrounding her. “So that’s what I basically took a vow to do. And that’s what I’m doing.”

Aaron Simon Gross can be reached at agross@berkshireeagle.com.