

GIRLS ON THE HOOD
Sisters Robyn (left) and Michele Shapiro celebrating in New York's Times Square after returning from Morocco, where they drove in an eight-day rally.



Nissan wasn't exaggerating when it named its new 4x4 the Armada. The strange sight of petite Michele Shapiro maneuvering the fleet-length, tan-gold SUV onto the center-island sidewalk in front of Times Square's giant Panasonic TV screen is enough to get harried New Yorkers to stop and look.

When 34-year-old Michele and her 25-year-old sister, Robyn, step out of the vehicle, climb onto the hood, and begin posing for a photographer, an elderly pedestrian with chestnut hair snaps a shot of the pretty pair with her own camera, shakes her head, and says, "This is New York."

Sure, it's a spectacle. But the passersby don't know the half of it.

This spring, the Shapiro sisters completed a punishing eight-day off-road rally across the Sahara Desert in Morocco. They were the first American team to compete in the Rallye Aicha des Gazelles, an international auto race that tests the smarts and stamina of its all-female band of road warriors. It was the Shapiros' first taste of competitive driving. They don't even own cars.

They grew up in Massachusetts, but today they are true Manhattanites. Michele is the research editor for *Glamour* magazine, Robyn an account executive with the ad agency Carlson & Partners. They like the life of shopping for designer clothes, getting their nails done, and hitting the city's hippest restaurants. But they put all that on hold for the competition, when they had to camp out in the middle of the desert, communicate with the people around them while understanding neither Arabic nor French, and find their way using only an old-fashioned compass, paper maps, and their own instincts.

But just how does one get from Manhattan high fashion to Moroccan off-road racing? For Michele, the twin interests date to her early teens, when she'd pore over both *Vogue* and *Car and Driver*. Because she and Robyn are nearly 10 years apart, they didn't share too many experiences growing up in Wayland. But they both had a fondness for tooling around town in Jeep Wranglers during their high school years. Robyn occasionally got carried away. The last day of her senior year at Wayland High, she tired of waiting in the endless line of idling cars trying to get out of the parking lot. She decided instead to drive her Wrangler clear across the athletic fields. The cop waiting by the exit was not amused.

Michele majored in philosophy at Ithaca College but has always done some of her deepest thinking behind the wheel. "I'm such a logical and analytical person," she says, "but with driving, you get to just let go." She once drove her Jeep from Boston to Guatemala. When she moved to Manhattan eight years ago, it pained her to give up her wheels. But she's still adventurous enough to want to visit all 50 states and seven continents, and analytical enough to keep a running list charting her progress. (Eight more states and three more continents to go.)

Robyn is also a fan of adventure travel. After her junior year

at Lafayette College in Pennsylvania, she spent seven months exploring Australia and Southeast Asia, including a week on a bamboo raft on the Mekong River.

But nothing prepared them for the Moroccan rally, which Michele discovered while surfing the Web two years ago. "We were challenged on emotional, mental, and physical levels — to the max, on a daily basis," says Robyn.

Rallying comes in many forms, but it usually involves modified cars traveling along the open road (or off-road surfaces) rather than on racetracks. The Moroccan rally stressed navigational skill over speed.

Michele was the driver, Robyn the navigator. Each day, their task was to pass six checkpoints scattered across the desert and then make their way to base camp before dark. On the first day, they got horribly lost after the second checkpoint and ended up

having to camp out by themselves that night. Under race rules, any team that does not make it back to base camp by noon of the next day is automatically disqualified. But after a sleepless night, they managed to get to the camp by 7 a.m.

There would be other close calls. A few times they had to dig their Nissan out after it got stuck on top of a dune, literally with two wheels on one side of the dune and two wheels on the other. Another time, they tried scaling a slippery and particularly steep mountain. Michele says that their car was at such an angle, "I could only see sky. It started slipping. I floored it. Rocks were flying. I could have easily rolled."

They handled the pressure by taking turns staying calm. "One time I was freaking out," Robyn recalls. "And Michele started to as well, and I was like 'I'm having the panic attack now — you can't!'"

In the end, they came in at 44th place in a field of 72 teams, a strong showing for their first race.

Their mom, Judy Brightman of Boston, began to breathe more easily only after the rally was over. Michele and Robyn called her and said, "We're staying in a gorgeous hotel, and, as we speak, we're having manicures and pedicures." Says Brightman, "That's much more my speed."

She's hoping her daughters have gotten the car-racing bug out of their system. They haven't.

Michele recently discussed her next goal as she drove the borrowed Armada — Nissan was one of their main sponsors in the race — through the narrow streets of her neighborhood in Manhattan's East Village. She said she wants to compete in the Paris-Dakar Rally, an even more daunting off-road endurance race.

Then she spied a jewel of a parking space and decided to dock the Armada. After her third stab at parking the beast, she smiled and said, "This is OK, right?" The back wheel was a good 4 feet from the curb. She laughed. "I didn't have to parallel park in the desert!" **BG**

Neil Swidey is a member of the Globe Magazine staff.

Speed Demons

From Wayland to Manhattan to the Moroccan desert, Robyn and Michele Shapiro have known only one speed: fast.

BY NEIL SWIDEY

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID L. RYAN
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BY DOUGLAS BELKIN

LAMAR LEASTON, shot four times and paralyzed in 2003, at his mother's apartment