



Lara relaxing at her
Riverside home

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LARA SPENCER may be a big personality on TV, but she prides herself on being just another mom in Greenwich

Anchored

by **JILL JOHNSON**

portrait photographs by **WILLIAM TAUFIC**

“When Lara was six, she wanted to be on the diving team, but they only took age eight and up. So Lara would stand next to the divers during practice and mimic their dives. Finally the coach gave in and took her. From then on, she was the first one to practice and the last to leave.” —CAROLYN VON SEELEN, LARA’S MOM

Pinning down Lara Spencer for an interview is no small feat. First, she hit a traffic jam on her way home from the city, which made it impossible to meet before she had to pick up her kids from school. Then her son got sick. Lara apologized via cell phone, not through an assistant or less-personal e-mail (though her e-mails are instantly warmed by the “XO” closing). When she learned that I was a working mom too, Lara sounded relieved. “Oh, you get it then,” she said.

Not only do I get it, I get what Lara doesn’t seem to realize: Her juggling act is like mine on steroids. She starts her day as an anchor on *Good Morning America*, plays a few sets of ferocious tennis in the afternoon, morphs into supermom by 3 p.m., wraps up the evening with a little book writing and sets her alarm for 4 a.m. OK, the book part isn’t totally true. She already finished *I Brake for Yard Sales* during her stint hosting *The Insider*. It’s due out in April. By then, a show she created, *It’s Worth What?*, could be picked up for a second season on NBC. On weekends, there are yard sales, a longtime ritual, and benefits to attend. It would be an endless list if David Haffenreffer, Lara’s husband, hadn’t taken on the role of CNO (Chief No Officer).

Fortunately interviews don’t fall into David’s department, and we locked in a Monday afternoon at the family’s home in Riverside. Their two-story French-countrysque house is lovely and understated, with a trampoline and jungle gym tucked behind it, an unfenced front yard, and two shaggy dogs that raced to my car to greet me. One jumped in as I got out and wagged its tail expectantly in my passenger seat. I coaxed him out and we headed to the front door. Lara appeared in the entryway, looking exactly as she does on TV, at least from the neck up: radiant skin, girl-next-door smile. Her *spectacular* legs, often on display on *GMA*, are concealed in faded Levi’s, except a few spots where skin peeks through frayed denim. She dresses up the jeans and a black tank top with a bejeweled gray knit cardigan.

Lara decorates her house in a dot-to-dot of great-find stories, and “mid-century” is her latest craze. We settle into a comfy art deco living room, where she, barefoot, sits Indian style. Dandy hops up into her lap, and she pets him as we talk. Lara has a cool tinge of hoarseness to her voice that the rest of us only have at the end of a cold, and an instant familiarity. When I suggest she interview herself, she replies, “No, I’m off. It’s all you, sista!”

We start with her lovable rescue dogs. “I adopted them after Hurricane Katrina,” says Lara, explaining that she had heard about trucks of homeless pets heading north. “There’s not a dog I meet that I’m not in love with. The weirder looking, the better. I love the offbeat—in everything, really. Harry is a golden-doodle and Dandy is a Lhasa apso—Shih Tzu—German shepherd.” We both chuckle over the image of that combo canoodling. “I did a story for *GMA* on dog DNA testing—that’s how I found out.”

That’s the kind of story—light, fun, family oriented (and often Lara’s idea)—typical of the 8 a.m. hour she has been anchoring on *GMA* since last spring. It’s a show she knows well; Lara was national correspondent from 1999 until 2004, when she left to host *The Insider*.

SUNNY L.A.

“The concept was that it would be a magazine format entertainment news show,” explains Lara. “I had two small kids and I thought it would be an interesting move and give me more time to be a mom. As national correspondent at *GMA* I was on planes all of the time and had to be ready at a moment’s notice when news broke. I love the glamour of

One of Lara's life philosophies: "When you start thinking you're important, that's when you have a problem."





Lara on the GMA set with Tyra Banks.

“But they do say to me, ‘Can you get a job like Mrs. Haffenreffer’s, so we can go to Justin Bieber concerts?’”

—ELIZABETH BARTH, LARA’S NEIGHBOR, ON HOW LARA IS NOT QUITE THE AVERAGE MOM

Hollywood, and I love movies and TV, so I went for it.”

Lara was able to work from New York for the first few years. The family moved out to L.A. in 2008. “They built a 25-million-dollar stage and really wanted me on it,” says Lara, who grew up in Garden City, Long Island. “We were sad to leave Greenwich. There’s such a connection to the East Coast for a native New Yorker like myself, and for my husband who is from Providence. But it turned out to be the most magical experience and the greatest gift that I’ve given my kids and myself.” Their daughter Kate was three when they moved. Their son Duff was five and had just finished kindergarten at Brunswick. After three years in L.A., Lara says, “He is a different kid. He

came back a leader.

“I love living in Connecticut and raising my family here, but there are things I miss dearly about California: the friends we made there; the weather; the lifestyle; the road trips we took on weekends. In our hearts we knew we’d come back, so we went for it with gusto. You ask me where I’ve been in the Western states and we did it!”

Workwise, Lara always proceeds with enthusiasm. “When you are doing a show that is centered around entertainment, you are privileged to experience what life is like for a rarified group of celebrities. You get to go to movie sets in places like Cairo, Egypt, and weddings like Tom Cruise’s in a beautiful town outside Rome. While not exactly breaking

news, these are experiences you only get once, and I cherished every minute of it.”

Lara covered hard news in the past. The explosion of TWA flight 800 was her big break but also what pushed her toward a lighter beat. “I covered 9/11. I covered Flight 800, which was a horrible experience and an important story to tell. I also covered the James Bond movie with Daniel Craig in Panama with the same gusto. You’re still storytelling.”

Lara gushes with enthusiasm. Her face is always animated. Her hands dance.

Her favorite celebrity interview? “Everyone goes, ‘Oh, I know, George Clooney’—and by the way, he’s not shabby and he’s not bad to look at!” She chuckles. “But my most cherished interview is Merv Griffin. I got to spend

“This summer I got to be on stage with Lady Gaga—I’m so in awe of her passion and talent—and I came home and was like a kid recounting it, and my daughter gave me the that’s-a-wrap signal. She was done. She wanted to talk about American Girl.” —LARA, ON HOW HER KIDS KEEP HER IN CHECK

a long day with him aboard his yacht, hearing the most fascinating stories of Hollywood in the Golden Years and what life was like with Lucille Ball and Carey Grant. It was awesome. I sat there like a kid with my head in my hands and said, “Tell me more, Mr. Griffin!”

MOVING BACK TO MOVE FORWARD

Last year Lara got a call from the president of ABC News offering her a job as an anchor on *GMA*. She knew it would be a challenge, going from a scripted show back to researching and writing her own material, but having “grown up” at *GMA* career-wise, she was thrilled. “My family had a big team meeting and decided it was the best thing for all of us, and it



Lara with singer Nicki Minaj

certainly has been for me professionally. I love the movie scene but I wanted to do stories about all of the things I care about: being a mom, things that affect families, the economy. I’m completely reinvigorated and I feel like the show is too. We have this team of five anchors who absolutely adore each other and I think you can see that every day.”

Regarding starting the day pre-dawn, Lara, a night owl by nature, says, “Kathie Lee used to say to me, ‘Trust me, you’ll get used to it.’ Most days I feel like I have jet lag, but I am used to it. I’m on the kids’ schedule. We eat dinner together at the early bird special hour. It’s been great for my diet—I can’t eat late, I can’t have that other glass of wine that I want.”

Lara is in the city by 5:10 a.m. and hits *GMA*’s breakfast spread. “I usually have eggs and a grapefruit,” she says, “but believe me, there’s a huge tray of muffins that call my name every day!” Next, Lara heads to hair and makeup for an hour. “There’s no greater gift than having somebody else blow-dry your hair,” Lara says, with a wide grin.

For someone born in the summer of ’69, Lara looks fantastic. And it’s more than just the “spackling,” as she calls her makeup. “For beauty, I do yoga once or twice a week. I play tennis a lot—about three times a week—and I run around like a lunatic and never sit down. I have really ridiculous energy. I try to eat well but don’t deny myself delicious things.” The cupcakes she claims to eat don’t go to her L’eggs-commercial legs. “I’m tall,”

concedes Lara, who’s five-nine, “and a good pair of heels never hurt anybody.”

What may not be evident when Lara is sitting on the *GMA* set, legs gracefully crossed, is how athletic she is. “I’m a big jock,” says the former Penn State diver. “I had a great twisting one-and-a-half. My dread was the reverse two-and-a-half, because you’re moving forward off the board and then spinning back toward it head first. I broke my hand in four places doing it. I still get nervous every day—it’s live TV—but I know I’ve got this. With that dive, I never got past the thumping heart, where I was like, ‘Get it together! Get it together!’ I loved diving, though. It was a huge educator in life in general. I’m a huge advocate of sports. My mom plugged me into everything because I was the youngest of five and she didn’t know what to do with me. It was a very happy accident.”

THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY

Carolyn Von Seelen, Lara’s mom, recalls, “When Lara was six, she wanted to be on the diving team, but they only took age eight and up. So Lara would stand next to the divers during practice and mimic their dives. Finally the coach gave in and took her. From then on, she was the first one to practice and the last to leave. When she was determined to do something, nothing got in her way.” This tenacity and another gift made Lara’s star potential apparent early on. “Her fifth-grade teacher told us that she needed to

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make a living with her unique voice," explains Carolyn. "The teacher said it was only the second time ever that she had made a suggestion to a student for a life destiny."

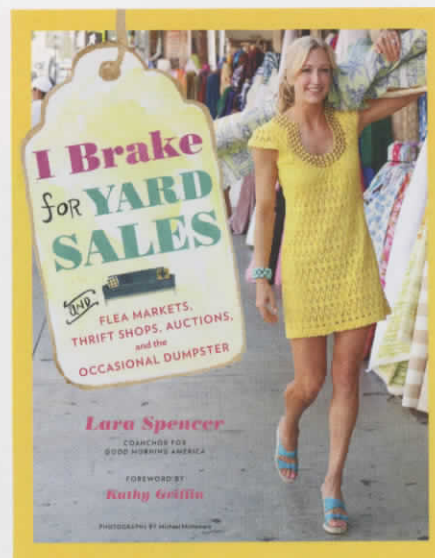
Lara brings up her parents often in our conversation. "Everything I've done I can trace back to their encouragement and watching them lead by example," she says. "They never ever lost hope when I was making zero money and people said, 'Forget it. Go do something attainable.'" Her father, who was president of Pringle of Scotland, passed away last January. Lara tears up when she talks about him. "Everywhere we went he would say, 'Do you know who this is?' Even to the nurses in the hospital, much to my dismay as I was sitting there crying. He was just so proud.

"He was in love with *Desperate Housewives*," continues Lara. "I got him on the set and did a story with him and the ladies of *Desperate Housewives*. He charmed them to the point where they asked him out for cocktails! My mom had to remind him that he had dinner plans," says Lara, chuckling.

Carolyn comments, "It was the thrill of his life." She watches *GMA* from her retirement community in Florida every day. Lara says, "She tells me how I did and how her friends feel about the stories we're doing. It's like having my own little focus group."

Lara's kids, now seven and ten, offer a different perspective. "They are the ultimate equalizer," says Lara. "They remind me that I'm really not that cool. This summer I got to be on stage with Lady Gaga—I'm so in awe of her passion and talent—and I came home and was like a kid recounting it, and my daughter gave me the that's-a-wrap signal. She was done. She wanted to talk about American Girl."

"Kate is a bit of a ham," says Lara. "The other day she told me she couldn't decide if she wanted to own a store that sells croissants or be a dog trainer, so the jury is out on whether she'll follow in my footsteps. Duff claims he wants to play pro football or basketball. I don't have



Lara's new book helps readers turn affordable finds into chic design elements.

the heart to tell him he probably won't be six-five. But I want them to dream big; that's what my parents did for me."

Lara's husband happily gave up his job as a CNN anchor to focus on real estate, showing fame isn't everyone's dream. "He was the most reluctant TV personality ever," says Lara. "For me, my job is like getting a college education and performing at the same time; for him, it was more like a college education and having your teeth pulled." The couple met on the air—literally—and had a down-to-earth first date: They hit a dive bar (the Ear Inn) and then golf balls at Chelsea Piers.

Haffenreffer (which is what Lara calls him when she beckons him from the other room) is a hands-on dad, filling the gaps in the parenting schedule.

"I hate that I'm not here in the morning," says Lara. "Today was school picture day. I laid out my daughter's outfit and the hairdryer and I left David a note and texted him...twice!" He chimes in, "Sometimes they get home from school and she asks me, 'Where were you when they got dressed this morning?'" They both laugh. David's judgment is sound, though, about the stuff that counts. He came up with a family rule for anytime the kids receive a gift or allowance: spend a little, save a little, give a little. "It's a great way to set up a foundation for life," says Lara, "which is: enjoy life,

be pragmatic, and remember that you're blessed and need to give back." As a dedicated supporter of International Medical Corps and Greenwich Adult Day Care, Lara follows the same rule.

The family loves their nook of Greenwich in a tight-knit neighborhood near Riverside Yacht Club and Ada's candy store. Elizabeth Barth, who lives next door, says, "Lara's personality on camera is very similar to her personality off camera." The two became swift buds upon learning of common friends in Chattanooga, Elizabeth's hometown and where Lara had her first reporting job.

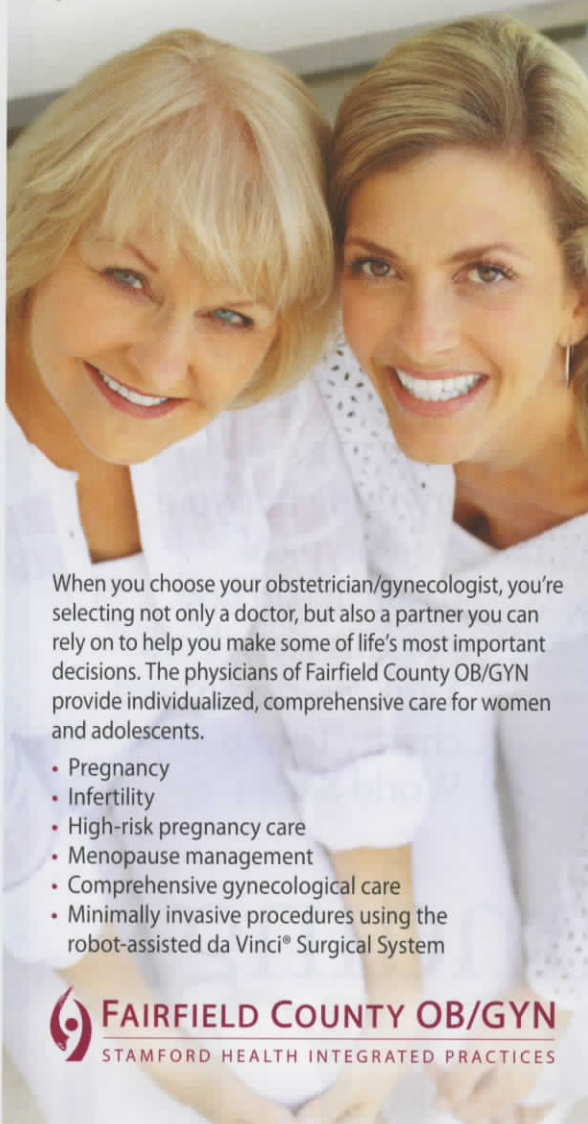
There are perks to being Lara's pal—like appearing on a *GMA* segment and backstage passes to Beyoncé. "When she's with my kids," says Elizabeth, "Lara is high-fiving them and doing silly dances. She's a mom. But they do say to me, 'Can you get a job like Mrs. Haffenreffer's, so we can go to Justin Bieber concerts?'"

Lara's take: "I'm not a diva. It's a hard job and then I have an even harder job when I take off the pretty clothes and put on the mom hat." In Greenwich, she forgets she's a celebrity. "At yard sales, when people are looking at me, I think, 'Oh, does she want that vase I just picked up?'"

Speaking of yard sales, you can't talk to Lara for an hour and not do just that. The former *Antiques Roadshow* host and daughter of a yard-sale fanatic, Lara loves to treasure hunt. "My garage looks like an episode of *Hoarders*," she claims. "I love to scrounge and then I do TV about the scrounge!" Now, in addition to the shows she has created around this theme, *It's Worth What?* and a pilot for HGTV called *Flea Market Flip*, Lara's book, *I Brake for Yard Sales*, promises to share the why's and how's of a secret she learned early on: "You don't need a lot of money to have great style."

The book will be released in April, just in time for yard sale season. Pick up a copy. Maybe then when you grab that vase before Lara, she'll be a good sport about it. **G**

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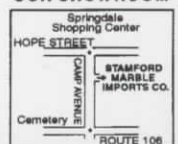
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