

Once-shy St. Louis teen steps up to Hollywood challenge

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St. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH TELEVISION CRITIC

05/02/2007



Chesterfield native Jessica Radloff is currently an actress on the Oxygen series "Campus Ladies."
(Karen Stockman/P-D)

Actors often talk about wanting to perform from the moment they grabbed the lead in the first-grade pageant. In high school, they were president of the drama club and starred in every play.

"You know those kids?" Jessica Radloff asks rhetorically. "That was not me. Not me at all."

Radloff, who grew up in Chesterfield and graduated from Parkway Central High School in 1997, lives in Hollywood these days and lights up in any spotlight.

She topped a thousand other applicants for a summer job with the "Tonight Show With Jay Leno" and showed so much spunk as an intern at "The Young and the Restless" that she wound up on the show.

At auditions for "Campus Ladies," the improvised sitcom produced for Oxygen by Cheryl Hines ("Curb Your Enthusiasm"), she was plucked from a crowd to join the cast even though she'd never done improv before.

But growing up, Radloff spent her afternoons — and evenings and nights — not in any kind of spotlight but at the kitchen table. Studying.

The self-described bookworm was so shy, she didn't even want a bat mitzvah. And although she's tall and gorgeous now, as a kid, "I was 'Ugly Betty,' honestly," she says, showing a picture of herself with wildly curly hair and big glasses.

Her best friends were on TV: Oprah and Lucy; the Keatons and the Huxtables. They kept her company while she labored over her homework, struggling to understand concepts even when they were explained over and over.

Her father, Stuart, a lawyer, helped her, often late into the night, patient but frustrated.

"He would say, 'Don't you get it?'" Radloff recalls. "Why don't you get it?"

Her mother, Barb, a homemaker, also was baffled.

All that work, often eight hours of homework time, brought straight A's, but it was a battle, so painful that even though she can laugh about it today, the scars remain.

"It turned out I have three different kinds of learning disabilities that we never knew about because I compensated so well," Radloff says. "When I was finally diagnosed, it was such a relief."

The learning disabilities, affecting the way she processes information, explained her difficulties in school. Validated, she went on to the University of Arizona, enrolling as a triple major — media arts, journalism and theater — in the nation's top program for students with learning disabilities.

"I thought I'd become a TV news anchor," she recalls. "I was thinking big. I wanted to be Karen Foss."

After her first year at Arizona, she got a chance to sit in Foss' chair, literally. A rabid sports fan, particularly of the Cardinals, she interned in the sports department at KSDK (Channel 5), working with then-sports director Mike Bush, who took her into the locker room after Mark McGwire hit his 70th home run.

"I never even imagined that I could be an actress, that I could be on a show like the ones I watched and loved so much," Radloff says.

But a career path began to unfold. For a summer at "The Tonight Show," she spent three months living in a Los Angeles hotel. ("Jay was awesome," she says. "His staff was horrible.")

The next summer, she put a toe into the acting pool when producers at the CBS soap "Young and the Restless," impressed by the enthusiasm with which she tackled menial intern tasks, added her to a teen story line.

That did it.

Acting "was such a hidden passion, I was afraid to nurture it," Radloff says. "But I got on the show, and it was incredible. It was an adrenaline rush like no other I'd ever experienced."

After graduating from college in 2 1/2 years, she moved to Los Angeles with a few credits and no manager, landing one by writing multiple letters — "a letter every day, four days a week, every one with my head shot" — for four months, until one finally responded and signed her.

To build credits, Radloff "worked my butt off," taking classes and seeking out internships. She went on countless auditions, losing more jobs than she landed.

"I just want to learn everything while I figure out what I'm doing," she says.

Print work and voice-overs help pay the bills.

Even after winning the role on "Campus Ladies," which recently wrapped up its second season, Radloff didn't stop studying, joining the Groundlings, the legendary Los Angeles improv troupe that launched the careers of stars including the late Phil Hartman, Lisa Kudrow and Jon Lovitz, and taking more classes.

Along the way, she figured out that "acting isn't brain surgery. You just listen and react truthfully. That's it in a nutshell."

To reinforce that, she watches the best old TV comedies over and over on DVD.

Radloff also figured out that "it's called show business because it's a business. The more you learn about how it works, the better off you are. And I'm interested in it all. I like to learn how the director works, what the lighting people do."

Like any young actress, she has experienced a lot of rejection.

"And frustration," she says. "In Los Angeles, nobody's ever honest with you."

Her teenage years, it turned out, prepared her well for Hollywood.

"High school was such a nightmare — being made fun of, dealing with kids' rejection — that this seems like nothing," Radloff says. "There's no way to go but up. And it's all worth it. I love it, I love it all."