

The Dream Girl

The biblical legend of Noah's Ark and the history behind Mount Ararat have always been the two most distinguishing cultural touchstones and landmarks for Armenians. Khachatur Abovian first began the phenomenon of successfully climbing the insurmountable Ararat in 1829. Almost 200 years later, the tradition still remains, as do the myths. The Book of Genesis says that Ararat is the legendary resting place of Noah's Ark. Donna D'Errico, with the power of a lifelong dream, faith, and God, will attempt to turn myth into reality.

Text Manouk Akopyan | Photo Tigran Tovmasyan

I first met with Donna D'Errico on a wet and gloomy Los Angeles afternoon, and accomplishing such a simple task on a rainy day is monumental in itself by city standards. But such climate hurdles and atmospheric conditions is nothing compared to what the former Playboy Playmate and *Baywatch* star is about to face as she prepares to chase her lifelong dream... by climbing Mount Ararat in search of Noah's Ark. No, really. She is. The road to Ararat has been a long time coming for the 42-year-old, who first became fascinated when she began studying the Book of Genesis, in whose pages is the story of Noah, the Ark and the Great Flood and doing school projects while she was a third grader attending Catholic School in Alabama – a part of the United States swathed by the Bible Belt.

Even though it's been 15 years since the blond vixen was patrolling the beaches as a sultry lifeguard on *Baywatch* and showcasing her killer curves for *Playboy*, D'Errico knows that she may be setting herself up for public mocking for openly pursuing her childhood ambitions. She says that one of the reasons she decided to announce her intent of looking for Noah's Ark was that people nowadays seem almost fearful of anything associated with religion; and she believes people have been conditioned to think that they should never let anyone know that they pray, go to church, or believe in God or the Bible. D'Errico openly admits that she's made choices in the past that were not in line with her faith, going as far as calling herself a "reformed sinner," joking that it felt like she spent four days in the confessional booth.

But, she follows, "thankfully, God forgives." "I know I've opened myself up for ridicule. People are going to say, 'look at this blonde *Baywatch* bimbo trying to find Noah's Ark. Who does she think she is? A professional mountain climber. She'll have better luck trying to find her brain.' Still, ridicule or not, me doing this might at least send the message that believing in God and the Bible isn't something you have to conceal or be embarrassed to admit, and that it doesn't make you a 'Jesus freak,' a 'bible thumper,' a 'religious zealot,' or a 'straight-lace.' I'm none of those things. I'm a sinner just like everyone else. Just one who has decided to turn a lifelong dream into a reality." Over the course of an extended conversation at the Hilton in Woodland Hills, where D'Errico says grace before lunch, she explains how she came to her epiphany. ▶





Last December, she was hospitalized for a very serious staph infection – MRSA, methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* – which she contracted from a relative who was hospitalized in a Pittsburgh ICU. After being infected without knowing for almost three weeks, her health rapidly deteriorated, her bones in excruciating pain and her face severely swollen – to the point where she did not recognize herself. “I didn’t want to die not fulfilling my dream,” she says. Donna takes a break from her Armenian table staples of

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houmus, tabouleh and pita bread, as she recalls the emotional wounds. “Religion is stronger for me now because of the fact that I fell away for many years,” she says, admitting that she is not proud of her life-lasting title as a Playmate. “I was the worst sinner you could imagine. I did things that I wouldn’t do today. Now, I’m not some religious nut preaching to people and quoting a Bible. It’s not that. I do it for myself.” D’Errico says that her faith got her through difficult times in the past, when as a single mother to her baby boy Rhyen, she ran away with just the clothes on her back from an abusive boyfriend who had been forcing her into working at a topless Las Vegas strip bar. “I was homeless for a while, and on government assistance. But at least I was free,” she says. “That was me. I had to do that. People think, ‘what kind of hard times has she had? She wasn’t able to get her manicure done?’ I know what it’s like. I’ve come a long way since then, but I will never forget how difficult things were for me and how much I struggled to give my son the best life I possibly could. What I have realized about religion is that you can have all the money in the world, and every kind of material thing you might want, and not be happy and be very alone if you don’t believe in God.”

D’Errico assures countless times that climbing Mount Ararat in search of Noah’s Ark isn’t some sort of publicity stunt. She’s had her fair share of stardom and recognition over the years. She was twice on the cover of *Playboy* (Nov. 1996, June 1998) and has been featured in countless movies, TV shows and commercials. She was previously married to Mötley Crüe founder and bassist Nikki Sixx, whom she divorced in 2007. But she is best known for her role as Donna Marco on *Baywatch* as a star and actress, where she was a regular from 1996 to 1998 on one of the most popular shows ever created. Notorious for running down beaches alongside Pamela Anderson and David Hasselhoff in slow motion and saving lives in knee-deep water, D’Errico constantly assures she is dead serious about her plan. So, we meet again three months after our initial conversation. This time, it’s at her Italian-designed, gated home overlooking the San Fernando Valley, where she lives comfortably with her 18-year-old son Rhyen and ten-year-old daughter Mary. At the foot of her doorstep is a daily-delivered tote bag containing a specially planned food allotment and diet plan. D’Errico is right on track, just like she promised. You can tell right away she hasn’t been reclining, eating Bon-Bons and waiting for her first-class ticket overseas during the interim.



Donna D’Errico

Donna D’Errico was born in Dothan, Alabama on March 30, 1968 while her father was serving a tour of duty in Vietnam for the United States Army. Raised in Georgia, she grew up in a small house next to her grandmother. D’Errico moved around to several states and worked numerous jobs before finding her calling in acting.

She is best known for her star role as Donna Marco on *Baywatch* and *Baywatch Nights* as an actress, where she was a regular from 1996 to 1998. According to the Guinness World Records, *Baywatch* became the most widely viewed TV series in the world, with an estimated weekly audience of more than 1.1 billion in 142

countries in 1996. Covering every continent except Antarctica, the show has since been seen in 148 countries and translated into 44 languages. D’Errico’s character was so popular that half-way into the first season of *Baywatch Nights*, she simultaneously appeared on the parent series *Baywatch* from there on out.



Suzanna Kuchayrjan

She’s been training hard – two hours a day, six days a week – to be physically conditioned with cardiovascular strength, stamina and endurance during her ascent. By now, she has already trained for alpine climbing at nearby ice-capped Mount Whitney with crampons and picks. By August, she will be in the best shape of her life as she’ll spend 14 days on Ararat. The treacherous route D’Errico plans on surmounting is made exclusive only to researchers. Other than not knowing whether she’ll be standing on snow or ice, she says that the biggest hurdle she sees will be adjusting to the high altitude. “With *Playboy* and *Baywatch*, I’m instantly stereotyped as unintelligent. A bimbo,” she says. “It’s not fair, but, what I wish is that people find out I am neither of those. It’s been a long time coming. I want to show my kids that they can do anything they put their mind to.”

Low and behold, if D’Errico does find it, the media frenzy will mirror those of last year’s phenomenon of the 33 trapped Chilean coal miners, if not more. Book and television deals will be thrown her way faster than you can say “Mount Ararat.” Oprah will come back for another show. D’Errico has spent countless hours studying the geographical nuances of Mount Ararat at length. During her trip, she plans on exploring Armenian landmarks in the country as well. “This will be my first trip to Armenia, and I’d like to learn more about the country so that I can take in some of the historical places while I’m there. I’m very excited about being able to see the history.” Ararat is covered in thick ice and snow 10 months out of the year, where she’ll be at the mercy of unpredictable weather. During the months of August and September, the glacier thaws, to the point where an optimistic D’Errico will possibly get a chance to see an exposed

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portion of the Ark, making it visible. D’Errico certainly isn’t the first to climb Mount Ararat looking for the Ark. During her trip, she will be joined by Jeremy Wiles – an explorer and filmmaker, helping him in his search for his friend, Donald Mackenzie, who disappeared on Ararat last September while searching for the Ark. Wiles is working on the titled documentary *Ark Hunter*. “I don’t have any wild dreams of actually finding it. I’m aware that all odds are against me. With all of my training and research, I’m going to do my best to look for it. That’s all I can hope for,” she says. “I will be happy just to be able to go there, climb Ararat, and search the areas where I believe the Ark is located. Whether I find it or not, I will have still accomplished my dream of just going there.” The best way to predict the future is by creating it. With a dream, D’Errico now has the chance. And as life sometimes dictates, some dreams, do come true. ■