

A Real Girl
Wendy Stuart Kaplan

Beautiful. Vivacious. Wendy Stuart Kaplan is polishing her star.

Like a glittering disco ball, she wants to light up everyone's dance floor. Her memoir, *She's The Last Model Standing*, is a lively "hustle" up and down the funny bone as she recounts the pursuit of her dreams, which were to go to Africa and then become a fashion model.

Climbing the unpredictable ladder of success, she paid the rent through a series of bizarre jobs that included dressing in a chicken costume while handing out restaurant flyers, posing with looks of terror and despair on her face for *True Confessions* magazine, and working as a hostess at a Japanese restaurant where she had to sit with the patrons who got drunk and sang karaoke.

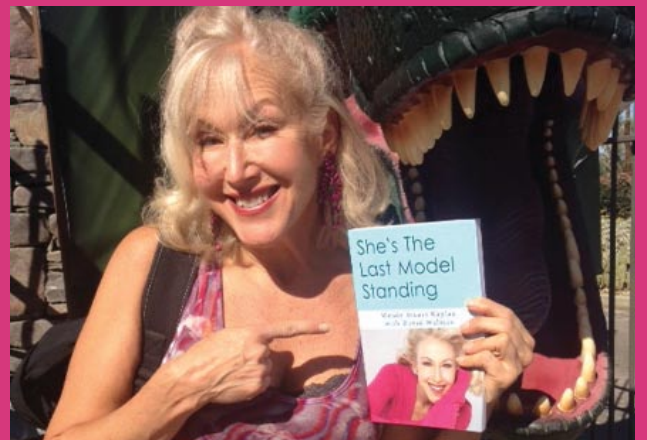
Born and raised in the Bronx, NY, Wendy drew inspiration from her mother's glamorous life as a model, beauty pageant contender and film actor. In 1935, her mother, as Miss Connecticut, won fifth runner up in the Miss America competition. While modeling for the prestigious John Powers Agency, her mother worked with future stars Lucille Ball and Shelley Winters.

Wendy remembers thinking, "That was the life for me."

The family faced challenges when Wendy's father was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, making her mother the caretaker and breadwinner for the household. Wendy's childhood was steeped in stories of past glory, as she watched her mother apply red lipstick at her mahogany dressing table, preparing to shop at the supermarket in the minks and fashionable wardrobe of her previous life.

When she was of college age, Wendy majored in anthropology at the State University of New York at Binghamton, and she realized her dream of going to Africa. Through a program of the Black Studies department, she went to the University of Ife in Nigeria to write and research a paper on voodoo. Along with thousands of local people, she attended a festival honoring Shango, the God of Thunder, and witnessed incredible healing ceremonies.

She writes in her memoir, "The experience would forever change my perception of the way things were in the world. I came to believe that anything is possible if you believe in it strongly enough." *Continued on next page*





This resolve served her well during the ensuing years in the late '70s when she moved to Manhattan in search of her dream to become a fashion model. She took on odd jobs and tried to break into acting but wound up side-stepping sleazy B-film producers. Eventually, she landed a Leggs pantyhose advertising campaign and posed with the Rockettes for a Times Square billboard. In her play-time, she frequented Studio 54 where she mingled with the likes of Andy Warhol, Calvin Klein and Liza Minnelli.

Wendy learned that her figure didn't suit the fashion model paradigm, but she is a perfect size eight and has succeeded as a fit model. She explained that the term is not correct or exact. It's not modeling; it's the analysis of a garment for fit.

"My job, today, is to take those clothes from the runway into the mass market," she notes. Wendy's feedback informs the designer on how to adjust the garment to a variety of shapes and sizes. Her experience has brought her to the top of her field, working for leading garment makers such as Nina McLemore, Eileen Fisher and Michael Kors outerwear, as well as the retailer Walmart.

With her decades-long background in the fashion industry, Wendy is bringing her expertise to a wider audience. "I seek to inspire women over 50 to be fierce through my fashion, beauty and lifestyle advice," she explained.

The desire to inspire others has been a constant theme in Wendy's life. To realize her philanthropic interests, she started Model with a Mission ten years ago, which

enables her to use her dynamic personality as a spokesperson and ties in her interest in ethnic cultures and her love of animals.

Together with her husband, the photographer Alan Kaplan, and their daughter Kyle, they make videos about saving endangered species. As an advocate for wildlife rescue, they donate their talent to organizations to help raise funds to continue their work.

Currently, Wendy is the on-camera spokesperson and panel host for the international Wildlife Conservation Film Festival where she has interviewed renowned environmentalists, including Dr. Biruté Galdikas, the foremost expert on orangutans.

When not in NYC, the Kaplans can be found at their residence in Milford, PA, where Wendy volunteers as an active board member of the Upper Delaware GLBT Center, an organization dedicated to improving the lives of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender citizens.

Wendy Stuart Kaplan is determined to make her dreams come true, whether through volunteering at Elephantstay, a refuge in Thailand, or by motivating people to make a difference in the world. Proudly, she states, "I'm a real girl, at a real age, doing real work." ●

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*To learn more about Wendy Stuart Kaplan, please visit modelwithamission.com. Her memoir, *She's The Last Model Standing*, is available on amazon.com.*