





Richards Almanac

DENISE
RICHARDS
has gone
from a sultry
big-screen siren
to a tabloid
sensation.
Now, with
a new reality
show, she's
hoping to
turn a new
page in what is,
increasingly,
the open book
of her life.

by
JOSEPH GUINTO

photograph by
DON FLOOD



“I HAVE TO CHECK ON A PIG,” Denise Richards says, bolting out of an overstuffed chair in the sitting room of her Calabasas, California, home. She slides on a pair of jeweled flip-flops and trots out through a glass door that leads to the backyard. There, three potbellied pigs are wallowing around in a pen, and one of them is making a squealy racket. ¶ Charlotte, Bert, and Bob — those are the names of the pigs. They live here as family pets. The family consists of Richards, the star of 1998’s *Wild Things* and whose life has recently become tabloid fodder and is now the subject of *It’s Complicated*, a new reality show; four-year-old Sami and three-year-old Lola, Richards’s two daughters with actor Charlie Sheen; and Irv, Richards’s father, who moved in after her mother, Joni (Irv’s wife of 37 years), succumbed to cancer in 2007. There are also three cats. And dogs. A lot of dogs.

“There are too many to count,” Richards admits. She has a weakness for strays.

She had a weakness for Bob too. Charlotte and Bert came first, you see. Then, when Charlotte appeared pregnant, Bert got fixed. Unfortunately for Bert, it was a false pregnancy. So, Richards got a stud for Charlotte. That was Bob. He was only supposed to stay temporarily, but now he’s there for good. “We just loved him so much, we kept him,” Richards explains.

This dog/pig/cat/kid/Irv haven is, perhaps, not where you’d expect to find a woman whom we first got to know as a big-haired, big-screen temptress. But things don’t always turn out the way you expect them to, a fact Richards knows all too well.

Just a decade ago, Richards was on the fast track to superstardom. With *Wild Things*, she etched herself into the pop-culture consciousness. Her steamy scene with Neve Campbell and Matt Dillon led *Entertainment Weekly* to declare the film “a grade-A B movie” and helped her to land

the A-list role as a Bond girl in *The World Is Not Enough*. True, she was cursed with the most ridiculous character in the 007 franchise’s history, Dr. Christmas Jones, a sultry 20-something nuclear physicist who wore short shorts and a half shirt (a role Meryl Streep couldn’t have played convincingly). Several predictably sexy big-screen roles followed, and in 2002, Richards cemented her star status by marrying Sheen.

But just about everything that happened after that, with the exception of having Lola and Sami, has been less than a boon to Richards’s career and her good name. The ugly public divorce from Sheen. The split from friend Heather Locklear. The brief but all-too-public relationship with Bon Jovi guitarist — and Locklear’s now ex-husband — Richie Sambora. All the while, between dogged tabloid coverage of her goings-on and bloggers pounding on her behavior like pork scaloppine (apologies to the potbellied pigs), Richards’s private life

has nearly ceased to exist.

Now she’s decided to finish the job herself by opening her home life to cameras. Richards figures that *It’s Complicated* — a reality show airing on the E! network that portrays her as a flawed but pleasant mom and actress — is her best shot at polishing her tarnished star. That is, if audiences can get beyond the headlines. “It has been horrible to have people hate me,” Richards says. “This show is an opportunity for people to see who I really am as a person instead of judging me from the tabloids. If, after that, they still think I’m a husband stealer or a gold digger or whatever else they say, that’s fine. But at least this way they can judge for themselves.”

a couple of people are riding horses past Richards’s house the day I arrive to talk to her. She lives in a gated community in the San Fernando Valley, at the foothills of the Santa Monica Mountains, about 20

minutes outside downtown L.A. The neighborhood is filled with ranch-style houses that, although wildly expensive, are modest by Hollywood-star standards. A white picket fence covered in red roses partly obscures a semicircular driveway, where three black BMW SUVs are parked. Sami, Lola, and their nanny are whisked away in one of them while Richards meets with me.

It's morning, and the family is still recovering from their late-night flight back from Hawaii after having spent a few days shooting *It's Complicated* there. Understandably, everyone seems to be moving a little slowly. Except for the dogs.

As Richards carries Lola to the car, Irv makes coffee — really good coffee. Irv and Joni used to own a chain of coffeehouses in San Diego called Jitters. He sold the business about four years ago, not long after Joni was diagnosed with renal cell carcinoma, a form of kidney cancer that is particularly resistant to treatment. Joni had been somewhat healthy from the time of her diagnosis until May 2006, when it was determined that the cancer had spread. In February 2007, she suffered a seizure; doctors then discovered the cancer had spread to her brain. She died just eight months later. She was 54.

Soon afterward, Richards sold the home she had been living in since her split with Sheen and moved nearby, to her current home. "I couldn't stay in the old house," she explains. "It reminded me of my mom being sick."

Her mother's illness coincided with the tabloid headlines. Joni's cancer resurgence in May 2006 happened a month after Rich-

ards's relationship with Sambora — who was separated from but still married to Locklear — became public. And the subsequent custody battle with Sheen partly overlapped the time during which Richards's mother was receiving last-ditch chemotherapy treatments. "These have been the most painful months of my life," Richards says once the kids are on their way. "They've been terrible ... terrible."

She asks if I still have my parents. When I say that I do, thankfully, adding that my mother has been hospitalized and quite ill recently, Richards reaches her hand toward mine and presses me for details. She also offers advice. "All I can tell you is that when you have a sick parent, you just have to enjoy whatever time you have with them and whatever time you've already had," she says. "That's why I'm so grateful that I had all that time with my mom. I mean, thank God when I did get divorced, I was pregnant with Lola, and my mom came up and spent every weekend with me and with Sami, who was a baby. It meant so much to me to have her here when I needed her. And now I have to use this to teach my kids that you've got to pick yourself up sometimes, no matter how far you're down."

We're talking about these weighty matters in Richards's sitting room, a comfortable, welcoming shabby-chic assemblage of several chairs separated by a room-length brown-leather coffee table that is as plush as a couch. Pictures of her mother and her kids are all over the bookshelves. She decorated it herself. "It's girly, I know,"

Above: Richards in *The World Is Not Enough*
Below: Richards and Neve Campbell in *Wild Things*

she admits. Richards is wearing a casual, floor-length red maxi dress. Her hair is pulled back and unkempt. She's not wearing makeup. Still, she's gorgeous.

Maybe *that's* why some people hate her.

Whatever has prompted some of the nastiness toward her on the entertainment blogs, Richards certainly doesn't claim to be blameless. She says she knew the relationship with Sambora wasn't going to look good to anyone who wasn't intimately familiar with her relationship with Locklear. She also admits that she made mistakes during her marriage. "But we all make choices," Richards says. "I made choices. I have to deal with the consequences of those choices. And I'm willing to do that."

What she wants now is for the tabloid-reading, blog-writing public to try and see her as something other than a salacious story. "I'm a single mother," Richards says. "I've been through a terrible divorce, which half of America has been through. I just lost my mom to cancer. So, I hope that what people see is that I am real, and that I've dealt with real issues that other people have dealt with. I hope they'll see that I am relatable."

1 Irv has just walked into the sitting room, carrying a wooden tray, two hand-painted cups on matching saucers, and a stainless steel carafe containing a freshly brewed pot of Hawaiian coffee. "Aw, thanks, Pop,"



Richards says. "He does everything around here." That includes making dinner. Richards and the girls make it a point to have dinner at the table each night around 5:30. When Irv moved in, he took over the cooking duties. "I told him, 'Dad, I feel like I'm taking advantage of you,'" she says. "But he really enjoys it."

A parent's help is the kind of thing that those people Richards wants to reach might relate to. Having a nanny, a personal assistant, and a housekeeper who comes through the room to light scented candles while we're having our coffee is somewhat less relatable. "It is fortunate that I have the financial means to have help with my kids," Richards admits. "I know that. I know that I didn't grow up the way my kids are growing up."

That's true. Sami and Lola have been famous and rich from birth. Denise Louise Richards of Joliet, Illinois, has not. She didn't get on that track until she was well into her teens, when her parents relocated to California. There, Richards got into modeling, profiting from pouty lips and cheek-

bones as angular as an I.M. Pei building. But she is only five foot six, so a long-term modeling career was unlikely. And Richards wanted to act, anyway. She quickly got parts on stalwart TV shows of the 1990s, such as *Doogie Howser, M.D.*, *Saved by the Bell*, and even *Seinfeld* (she was the NBC executive's daughter whose cleavage George Costanza was caught staring at). *Starship Troopers*, in 1997, was her big-screen breakthrough, followed by roles in *Wild Things* and *The World Is Not Enough*. But though Richards went to Hollywood, she never "went Hollywood." Her pre-Sheen relationships rarely merited attention, and she was never a scene maker. Plus, Richards maintained her childhood friendships and was especially close with her sister, Michelle, and her mother.

"You can take the girl out of Illinois," she says, "but you can't take the Illinois out of me. And I want to bring as much of that — as much of how I was raised — as possible to my daughters' lives. I want them to have as much of a stable family life, especially given the situation, as possible."

It's not just "the situation" that makes a

stable family life difficult. It's her profession. Acting roles can require long stays away from home. That's one reason Richards is now eyeing jobs that film only in L.A. or ones that have short shooting times. The trade-off? One of her upcoming projects, the movie *Deep in the Valley*, has Richards credited behind Rachel Specter, whom most men will recognize as that girl in the RGX Bodyspray commercials. "I feel sorry for my agent," Richards says, curling up in her chair, knees drawn into her chest, dress pulled down tightly over her bare feet. "It's funny how your priorities change once you have kids. It has hurt my career. But I would give up my career for my kids. That's why the reality show has been so great. I get to work at home."

She also gets to control her own image — a little. Richards serves as an executive producer on the show, along with Ryan Seacrest. "The show is real," she says. "I'm wearing sweats a lot in it. I don't have people doing my hair and makeup. Seeing your real self on-screen like that is a bit of a shock. It's amazing what the glam team does when



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they put you together. Still, with the show, you do get to control situations more than you would with the paparazzi."

What can't be controlled is George, a tiny dog who has just attempted to leap over the tray of coffee and failed. He's landed in my cup, spilling its contents all over the leather coffee table. As Richards laughs off the dog's foolishness and leans over to clean up the mess, I find myself facing a George Costanza moment. But after having spent the last hour relating to Richards in a personal way — for crying out loud, we've been talking about my mother — I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if I pulled a Costanza. So, I simply look away.

Later, this gets me to thinking about our tabloid times. I follow celebrity gossip and the daily parade of paparazzi pictures. I enjoy it, even — a lot. But aren't there times when we, the audience, have to turn away? For instance, when there's yet another shot of a skirted starlet awkwardly exiting an SUV. Or, perhaps, when there's news about a sad divorce between two angry people whose daughters could suffer the consequences of all the vitriol.

Also, maybe it's just me, but, frankly, I'd rather hear a little less about the scandalous stuff and a little more about what Irv is cooking for dinner tonight. To her credit, though, Richards does not hesitate to talk about her tabloid times. But she also doesn't seem to mind not talking about it. "I used to be really private," she says. "But at this point, I'm pretty much an open book, because everything I could possibly imagine has already been written about me. And then some."

I look her in the eyes — they're sort of a stained-glass blue; a saturated, backlit kind of color — and ask her if, with her life now on total public display, thanks to her reality show, she believes that there's anything left that's nobody's business.

She thinks about this for a while, shaking her head from side to side. I suspect she is about to say, "No," but instead, she answers sternly: "There are a lot of things that are nobody's business. My custody is nobody's business. My situation with Charlie is nobody's business. My situation with Richie was truly nobody's business. But people

make it their business, and then they make judgments. Like with the paparazzi — if I don't smile at them, people say I'm miserable. If I do smile at them, people say I'm courting the press. I lost too much weight and people said I was anorexic. I was just in Hawaii with a bikini on and people said I looked fat. You can't win. So I say ..."

Actually, I can't print what she says. But

you can probably guess. "I'm a very blunt, candid person," Richards admits. "I used to not be. But now I just don't care. Now I'm comfortable just being myself. People can make whatever they want to out of that."

No doubt we will. **AW**

Contributing editor **JOSEPH GUINTO** admits that his wife has a girl crush on Denise Richards and that he once had a picture of Neve Campbell hanging in his office.

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