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MEET THE REAL TARA HITCHCOCK

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COVERSTORY

MORNING GLORY

For 7 years, Tara Hitchcock has 'steered the ship' for the Valley's top-rated morning TV show

Story by JESS HARTER
Photos by TORU KAWANA

Hitchcock at a glance

HOMETOWN: Born in Pennsylvania, and also lived in Massachusetts and New Jersey. But settled in Dallas suburb of Plano when she was 10.

EDUCATION: Majored in political science and communications at Boston College. Earned master's degree in journalism from Northwestern University in Chicago.

VALLEY HISTORY: Hired by Channel 3 in April 1996 to host "Good Morning Arizona." Has lived in Ahwatukee Foothills for past seven years.

FAMILY: Single. Has three younger sisters. Parents still live in Plano.

It's 4:20 in the morning and Tara Hitchcock is on her way to makeup — which at Channel 3 means she's headed to an unoccupied desk at the far end of a mostly empty newsroom "where the light is much better than at my desk."

There, she turns on a small TV and switches it to one of the all-news cable channels. "Have you been watching the news from Iraq this morning?" she asks while manuevering a small mirror to put in her contact lenses. "I find I've gotten hooked on it."

Several minutes later, self-applied makeup complete, Hitchcock is off to the wardrobe department, also known as the women's restroom, where she digs a blouse out of her oversize bag to replace her sweat shirt.

After clipping a power pack to her sweat pants and snaking the microphone through her top, Hitchcock re-checks her hair, makes a final turn before the mirror and then hurries through the newsroom toward the studio. "Oops, I'm running late," she says, glancing at the wall clock.

It's 4:59 as Hitchcock, still wearing sweat pants, sits down behind her on-air desk and puts in the earpiece that allows her to hear the control room. She quickly scans the morning's schedule, putting it down just as the studio's red light comes on.

She turns to the camera. "Good

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Tara Hitchcock anchors Channel 3's "Good Morning Arizona" show from 5 to 9 a.m. weekdays. The Ahwatukee resident says the question she's most often asked is what time she gets up. The answer? She usually gets up around 2:30 a.m.

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Morning Arizona . . ."

Thus begins the work day for the host of Arizona's most popular morning television show. For the next four hours, Hitchcock — along with co-workers Scott Pasmore, Dan Davis, Brad Perry and several other contributors — will inform and entertain viewers with a decidedly casual mixture of news, sports, features and remote reports.

Channel 3's motto is "The Place With More Stuff," which critics sometimes lampoon as "The Place With More Fluff." But it's undeniably a formula that works: For a decade, "Good Morning Arizona" has soundly beaten the national morning shows, even NBC's popular "Today" show, in the ratings. It has helped make Channel 3 one of the most successful independent stations in the country.

After the show, Hitchcock sat down to discuss the philosophy of "GMAZ," her role with the show and what her future might hold.

Get Out: Let's start with the obvious. What time do you get up?
Tara Hitchcock: I got up at 3 today. I'm trying to sleep in just a little bit. Normally I get up at 2:30.

GO: How do you cope with a schedule like that? I mean, how do you go to a ballgame or a concert . . .
TH: And have a life?

GO: You must take a lot of naps.
TH: I don't get a lot of sleep, to be honest with you. I'm still trying to find a balance there, because my attitude is life's too short. So if there's something cool, I'll always say, "I'll catch up on sleep later." Normally that still doesn't happen because you're on to something else.

GO: So how do you do it?
TH: The best answer I can give is I honestly love what I do. You could give me a million dollars to get up this early, but if I worked for jerks, or with jerks, I'd never do it in a million years.

GO: What about your wardrobe? Does someone at the station tell you what to wear on the air?
TH: I pick all my own stuff. They give you a little clothing allowance that probably amounts to a few suits a year after taxes. Sometimes viewers will call in and say, "Where'd you get that sweater?" I do a lot of shopping resale. I do garage sales. So half the time I can't remember where I got something.

GO: Really? And the station is always OK with your choices?
TH: In seven years, there's been one time that Phil (Alvidrez, Channel 3's general manager) called me in about something I wore. It was this wool floral vest with this lace shirt — looking back, I don't know what I was thinking — and this was his way of saying I don't ever want to see that on you again: He calls me into the office and he sits me down and he goes, "What are your plans for this outfit?"

GO: If the schedule is the worst thing about your job, what's the best thing?
TH: The people — our guests, our viewers, my co-workers, my bosses. Everything people-related about the job is great.

GO: I imagine the pay isn't bad either.
TH: I talk to school kids all the time, and they always ask, "How much money do you make?" When I got out of school, I started making $12,500 (at a station in Beaumont, Texas) and I thought that was great. I'm a believer in what Oprah always says: If you just do what you love and do it well, the money aspect will fall into place.

GO: Are you saying that being on television is something you've always wanted to do?
TH: When I was younger, I remember watching the news and thinking, "I'll bet that's never boring." And my goal in life has been: I don't want to be bored. I just want to be happy. People always wonder, "Why haven't you moved on? How come you haven't gone to New York?" I have no interest. If there's something that's more fun than hanging out with my friends for four hours in a great city, then I'd do it.

GO: No immediate plans to move on?
TH: I love it here. Why would I want to leave? The money's not that important, really. It's mostly just having fun and not getting bored.

GO: When you came to Phoenix seven years ago, you had to replace a very popular "Good Morning Arizona" host in Jodi Applegate, who had moved on to NBC. How intimidating was that?
TH: I was so naive that I think it helped. I was 25 and I could not believe that I was hired in Phoenix. I was so amazed that I thought, "You know, if I get fired in a week, I can't believe I was in Phoenix for a week!"

GO: You thought you might get fired?
TH: A lot of people called (the station) and said, "You've got to be kidding me!" But you know what? I probably would have called, too. They were like "Are you out of your mind? Who is this person?" But that's where my bosses were great. They never put any pressure on me. They never made me feel like I had one week left and I was in trouble.

GO: It couldn't have been that bad . . .
TH: You didn't get the letters I got. There were a few women in the newsroom that hoped they would have gotten the job. And that's totally understandable —

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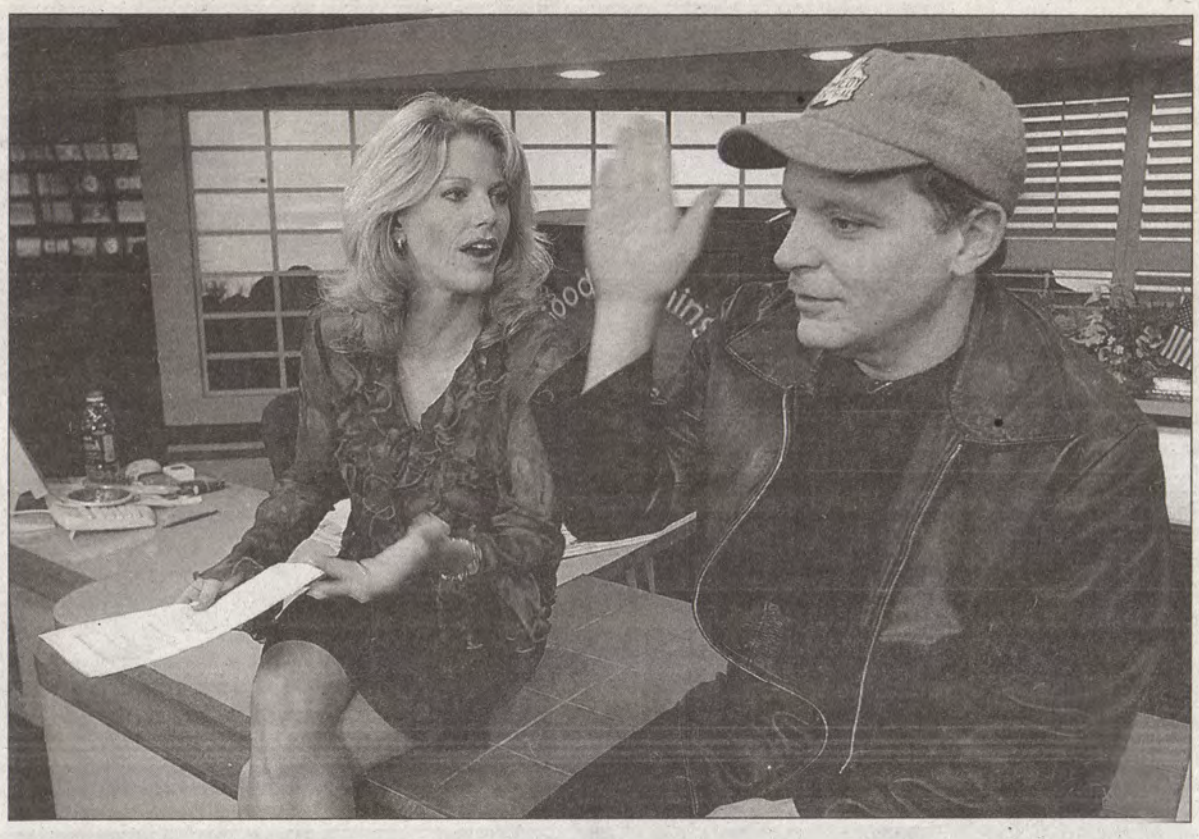

Tara Hitchcock interviews comedian Richard Jeni, who was promoting his appearance at the Tempe Improv. Besides the basic news, weather and sports, "Good Morning Arizona" gives viewers a large amount of entertainment and lifestyle information.

Hitchcock takes advantage of a commercial break to touch up her makeup. Channel 3 doesn't employ makeup artists or stylists, so on-air personalities must do it themselves.

'Good Morning Arizona' tops Valley's morning TV ratings

Here's how the Valley's five main TV morning shows fared in Nielsen ratings and audience share during the February 2003 sweeps period:

6 to 7 A.M.

Ch	Show	Rtg	Shr
3	Good Morning Arizona	5.2	21
12	12 News Today	3.0	12
10	Fox 10 Arizona News	2.6	10
5	News 5 Morning News	2.1	8
15	ABC 15 News	1.3	5

7 to 9 A.M.

Ch	Show	Rtg	Shr
3	Good Morning Arizona	5.7	18
12	Today	3.8	12
10	Arizona Morning	2.8	9
15	Good Morning America	2.2	7
5	The Early Show	1.9	6

A ratings (point equals 15,370 homes with TV; a share is the percentage of sets in use. For example, "Good Morning Arizona's" 6 a.m. rating means the show is being watched in nearly 80,000 Valley homes, representing just over one-fifth of that hour's TV audience.

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they've been here, they've got more experience. I felt bad because I know there were people who were just devastated Jodi left and were thinking "Who is this person?" I felt bad because, you know, I wanted them to like me.

GO: It certainly seems to have worked out. "Good Morning Arizona" is still No. 1 in the ratings.
TH: My main thing was I didn't just want the ratings to go down. The funny thing is not only did the ratings not go down, the ratings went up. And it was more because everybody's role expanded when Jodi left.

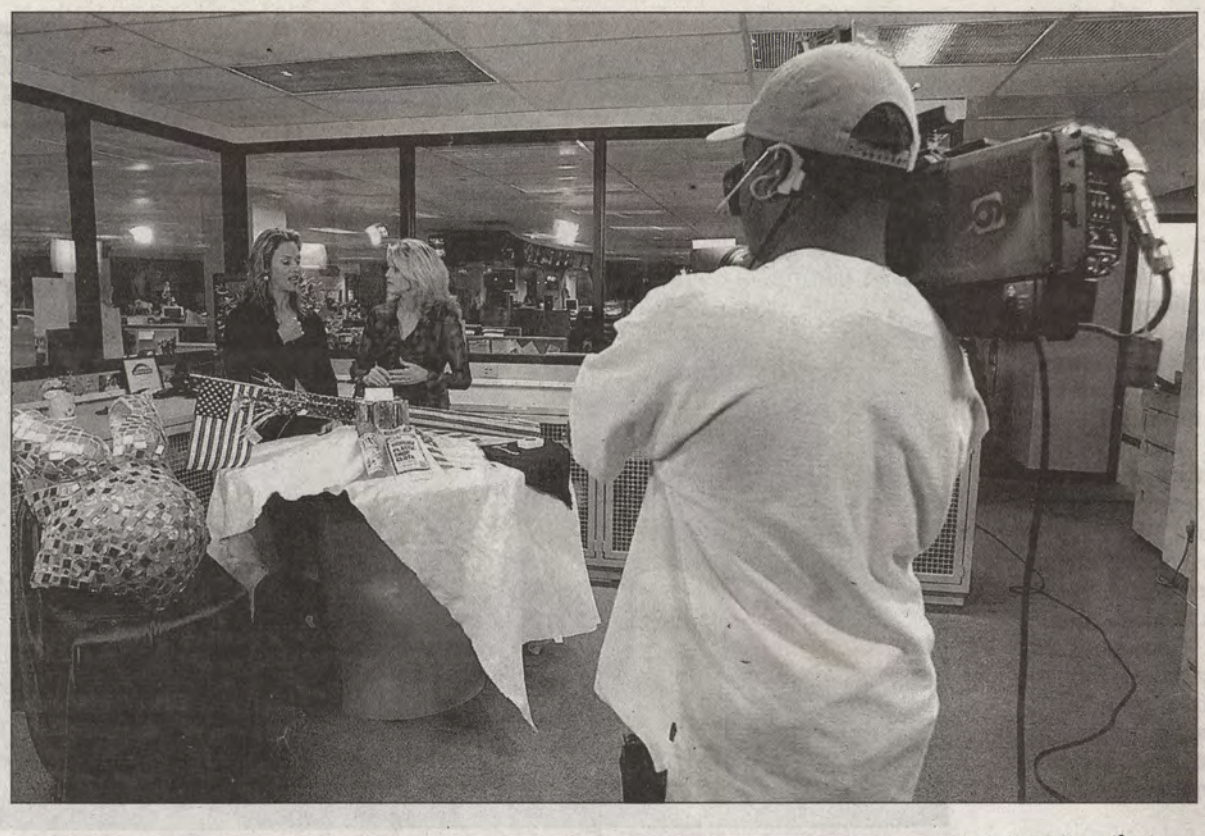
GO: And that's made the show better?
TH: The biggest reason we're No. 1 is the people and the way we get along. The most common questions I'm asked are "When do you get up?" and "Do you guys get along that well off the air?" You can't fake that for four hours.

GO: Some shows seem to be trying. The formula is getting copied a lot.
TH: People now are trying to hire anchors that have personalities. They want this great mix. "CBS in the Morning," the early network show, is really struggling because they keep replacing good newsreaders with good newsreaders but they haven't found that great mix of people. And that's why "The Today Show" has done well on the national level, because Katie (Couric) and Matt (Lauer) actually get along great. They've got good rapport.

GO: Just like on your show?
TH: It's so natural on our show. It's what you asked earlier about replacing Jodi. My biggest concern was will these people like me — not just the viewers, but people I work with. I wanted the roles expanded because it took the pressure off me.

GO: How so?
TH: If it was just me for four hours, I wouldn't watch. My parents wouldn't watch, and they love seeing me on TV. So it's nice to have that mix. It's the group effort. It's the content of the show. It's the loose feel — being able to make mistakes and not being ashamed of them at all. It's having people leave their homes in a good mood yet being completely informed about all the big stuff.

GO: So in this group effort, what's your individual role?
TH: I steer the ship, but I don't consider myself any more important than anyone else on the show. I'm good at steering



Photographer Mickey Wheeler shoots Tara Hitchcock and Valley artist Jennifer Forman as they do a segment from the photographers' "bullpen" in the newsroom. "Good Morning Arizona" typically uses several non-studio locations around the Channel 3 building.

A TV monitor shows Hitchcock interviewing Bernie Lawitz, owner of Valley store Beads Galore.

things. I'm good at having people talk in my ear, knowing that we've gotta do this next and knowing that we're coming out of this. If I have a talent, it would be that. I can kinda multi-task in the moment.

GO: Let's talk about the show's relationship with its viewers. There seems to be a deliberate attempt to build a sense of familiarity with the on-air people.
TH: There's been times we've talked too much about personal stuff. I'm always wondering why people would care. But then we go out in public and people say, "Oh, I loved your dad's Super Bowl dip." They want to know about that stuff — how we all get along and the behind-the-scenes stuff.

GO: There's also that "loose feel" you described.
TH: It's fun to be able to goof up and have people walk into the shot and hand us scripts. People like that. If you screw up and you just say, "We screwed up," they are so forgiving. It's when you try to pretend or fake it that people at home say, "Who are they kidding?" We don't do any of that, and I think that's why people like the show.

GO: So not taking yourself too seriously is important to the show's success?
TH: What we do obviously is not brain surgery. Lately we've been doing a lot of promos, and I'm so sick of seeing myself on a poster or hearing my voice. But, you know, we're so lucky. We have such great jobs. If all I can complain about is I hate to put on a lot of makeup in the morning, I have a pretty nice life.

GO: But can't this relationship with viewers be a double-edged sword?
TH: No, I don't think so at all. It's always interesting that people are interested in some of the things that we do. I look at a George Clooney or Julia Roberts when I want to read gossip. So it's weird when people seem interested in what we do.

GO: You don't mind it?
TH: If people feel they can come up to me and either yell at me because they think I stink or tell me they really like the show, then I'm happy. I just think it's important to be approachable. No one has ever accused me of being different in person than on the air. Everyone is like, "You're just like you are on TV." And that to me is a huge compliment.

GO: So people expect you to be more . . .
TH: Bitchy?

GO: More reserved, let's say. But they're right. You seem exactly like you do on the air.
TH: And everyone on the show is like that. Scott's the same way on the air and off the air. Dan? Same way on the air and off the air. Brad? Same way on the air, off the air.

GO: Speaking of Scott, there sure seems to be a lot of flirtation on the show between the two of you.
TH: A lot of people say that! We've never dated. He's like a brother — I'd never date him or set my friends up with him. And I think he feels the same way about me.

GO: Do you ever have problems with viewers who maybe like you too much?
TH: There have been a couple issues with people whose e-mails get extremely suggestive and they just won't stop

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e-mailing. There was one instance when I had to go into the boss's office. I guess you're notified legally if there's a threat or concern, and that's happened a couple times. But do you know what? My attitude is that if someone is determined to get you, they're gonna get you.

GO: Well, let's hope not . . .
TH: I don't mean to make light of something as serious as stalking, because it's extremely serious. But I just can't walk around that concerned about that. You do what you can to be safe, but I've been lucky in that it hasn't been a serious problem.

GO: But I imagine that you're easily recognizable in public.
TH: Not really. I can dress down very easily. The voice gives it away a lot of times if I'm dressed very scummy. My co-workers joke about me usually being in sweats around the office, but out and about I'm usually dressed down like that, too. I don't want to dress up in a business suit and high heels every time I go out. You'll see me in sweats and T-shirts a lot.

GO: What's next for Tara Hitchcock?
TH: I just re-signed back in October for another year and a half. Some people go,

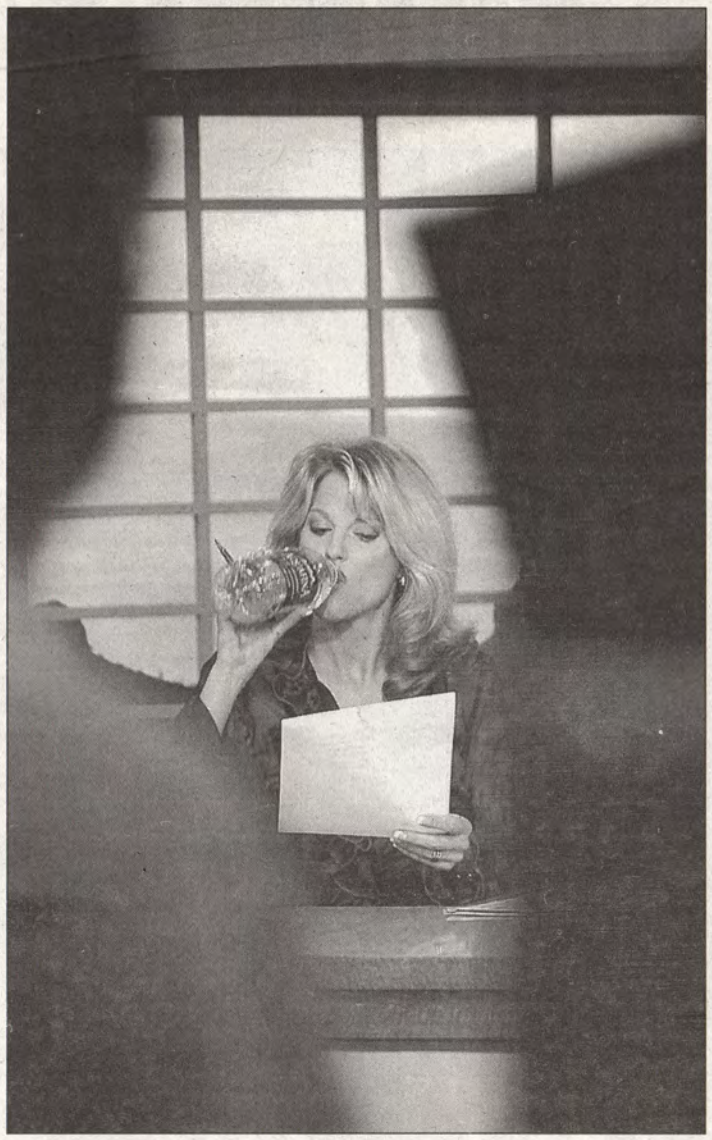
> **No one has ever accused me of being different in person than on the air. Everyone is like, "You're just like you are on TV." And that to me is a huge compliment.**
>
> Tara Hitchcock

"She must not be able to get a job somewhere else." It has nothing to do with that. I love Phoenix. The only thing I'd like to do — I love sports.

GO: Recently you covered the Tucson Open golf tournament for the USA Network.
TH: Exactly. If there are some side things that don't interfere with what I do here, then that's kinda in my future.

GO: Speaking of your future, there's a lot of speculation among viewers on Channel 3's Web site about whether you're engaged . . .
TH: I've been dating someone since about June, but I'm not engaged. He's in commercial real estate. He's a great, great guy.

Contact writer Jess Harter at (480) 898-5690 or jharter@aztrib.com.



Tara Hitchcock takes a drink of water during a commercial break. Hitchcock signed a new contract with Channel 3 last fall, ensuring she will stay with the station until mid-2004. "I love it here," Hitchcock says. "Why would I want to leave?"

Up close and personal: Tara Hitchcock reveals ...

What's Tara Hitchcock's favorite arts and entertainment magazine?

The last great book she read: " 'Beach Music' by Pat Conroy. He's the guy who wrote 'Prince of Tides.' It's about a guy whose wife commits suicide, but I don't remember much else. It was two years ago. I just don't get a chance to read that much."

The celebrity she most resembles: "I've been told Jodie Foster or Meg Ryan, but I don't see it in either case. I would love to say somebody like my friend Gena Lee Nolin from 'Baywatch,' but I don't look anything like her."

Her favorite all-time movie scene: " 'About Last Night' with Rob Lowe and Demi Moore. I love the end when they're at the park and they've been broken up for a while and he goes, "Let's just go to some old joint." And he knows he's already built his little restaurant. I cry every time during that goofy scene at the very end when you know they're going to get back together because they're soul mates."

What her last meal would be: "Grande skim hot cocoa with extra, extra whipped cream from Starbucks. Or Coffee Plantation, not to rule them out. I would have Mark Tarbell's garlic mashed potatoes. I would have this funky dish that Eddie Matney makes with this steak that's got cheese and all this crud inside. It's like a stuffed steak. I don't even know what it's called. It's breaded, it's totally fattening and gross, but it's delicious. Um, maybe some lobster. I'd have some strawberry shortcake from Tarbell's, that would be dessert. That's probably enough."

Her favorite song: " 'Every Breath You Take' by the Police is a song I love. And anything by Brian McKnight. I like all kinds of music — Andrea Bocelli, Nelly. I even like country music."

What you'd find in her bedroom: "Nothing good. Magazines everywhere, a lot of clothes on the floor, makeup stains on the rug. And Vaseline for my chapped lips at night — but I cannot find the top for it so it's got my hair in it and it's just gross. What does that say about me?"

The five items she can't live without: "My makeup case, with lots of undereye concealer; my cell phone; my CDs; a decent outfit that you can wear anywhere; and a ring my grandmother gave me that hopefully will one day turn into my wedding ring."

The worst (or best) lie she ever told: "I am not a good liar, because I totally give myself away. The worst one involved — I don't know how to word this — it was being caught with a boyfriend by my mom and how I got out of it. It's not what you think. I don't want people to think I was sleeping around at age 16 because it wasn't that at all. But it was being caught in a compromising situation and how my mom totally bought it."