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Arizona's Lovable Anchor—Off the Record

On the cover

For over 12 years, Tara Hitchcock has been one of the Valley's favorite news anchors on Channel 3's "Good Morning Arizona."

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Waking Up With TARA

ARIZONA'S LOVABLE ANCHOR—OFF THE RECORD

by ALIYA HASSAN AND JESSICA PARSONS
photography by RJ COOK PHOTOGRAPHY

She has one of the most beautiful faces in television and one of the most recognizable laughs, but what you may not know about “Good Morning Arizona’s” Tara Hitchcock is that she considers herself to be just one of the guys—evident by her worn-out Red Hot Chili Peppers t-shirt, her down-to-earth approach to a “glamorous” job, and her ability to stand her ground as the only woman anchor in an acclaimed, mostly male cast. Amidst successes, devastations, roundtrips and bloopers, Hitchcock continues to wake up the state every morning with news, entertainment and, of course, a chuckle or two.

THE DREAM JOB

She was a budding journalist in her hometown of Beaumont, Texas, but it wasn’t until Hitchcock headed a new morning program that she felt she had found her true niche. Focusing not only on news, this magazine-style approach allowed Hitchcock to dabble in cooking and live interviewing. The experience led her to realize that she truly enjoyed the morning talk show format and no longer wanted to pursue evening news.

After two and a half years honing her craft in Beaumont, Hitchcock set her sights on Phoenix. She heard rumblings of a startup morning show called “Good Morning Arizona” and an anchor Jodi Applegate, who she considered “phenomenal.” Applegate had received another offer and “Good Morning Arizona” was looking for a new host. The timing couldn’t have been more fitting, and although Hitchcock had doubts about her chances, she applied for the job anyway.

“There’s no way they’re going to hire this 25-year-old girl from Beaumont to fill those shoes,” Hitchcock said to herself. But that’s exactly what they did. “I sent my tape in on Saturday. Tuesday, they fly me into Phoenix and Thursday, I have a job,” says Hitchcock. “My agent said it’s never happened like this.”

Although landing her ideal job straight away was unexpected, Hitchcock fully embraced the opportunity to leave her hometown and conquer a new city. Rather than feeling intimidated, she was encouraged by her unfamiliar surroundings as they allowed her to enjoy the

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experience and not fret over possible criticism and judgments made by a city full of people she didn't know.

"I couldn't believe I had a job in Phoenix. I didn't look great and I didn't know what the heck I was doing," says Hitchcock. "I think a lot of viewers probably wondered 'what are they thinking?' but I didn't care. No one gets that lucky in television, so I wasn't stressed, I wasn't competitive and I didn't feel pressure; I was having fun and enjoying a great ride."

ONE OF THE GUYS

For over 12 years, Hitchcock has won over Valley viewers with her relaxed and reachable approach, but she credits her mom, dad and high school experiences for forming her outgoing and likeable personality. "I was the buddy," she says. "I was the one all the guys confided in and always had a great time with. The fact that I was never complimented about my appearance reminded me it's not really what matters, and I can set myself apart by just being me."

But since her appearance had never been a primary focus growing up, makeup, hair and wardrobe became a challenging aspect of Hitchcock's career. She surprised everyone one morning when she walked onto the set wearing a second-hand, beaded top paired with a wool embroidered vest.

"I thought it looked great, but when I got done with the show, my news director looked at me, looked at my vest and said, 'What are your plans with this outfit?'" Hitchcock recalls. "I didn't think it was that

bad, but it was! It was horrible! It was worse than any semi-bad outfit I've ever worn."

Easily able to laugh at herself, this is one of Hitchcock's favorite stories. She sees it as an example of how close-knit the staff at the TV station is, and how the people she works with have truly become her family.

BLUNDERS AND BLOOPERS

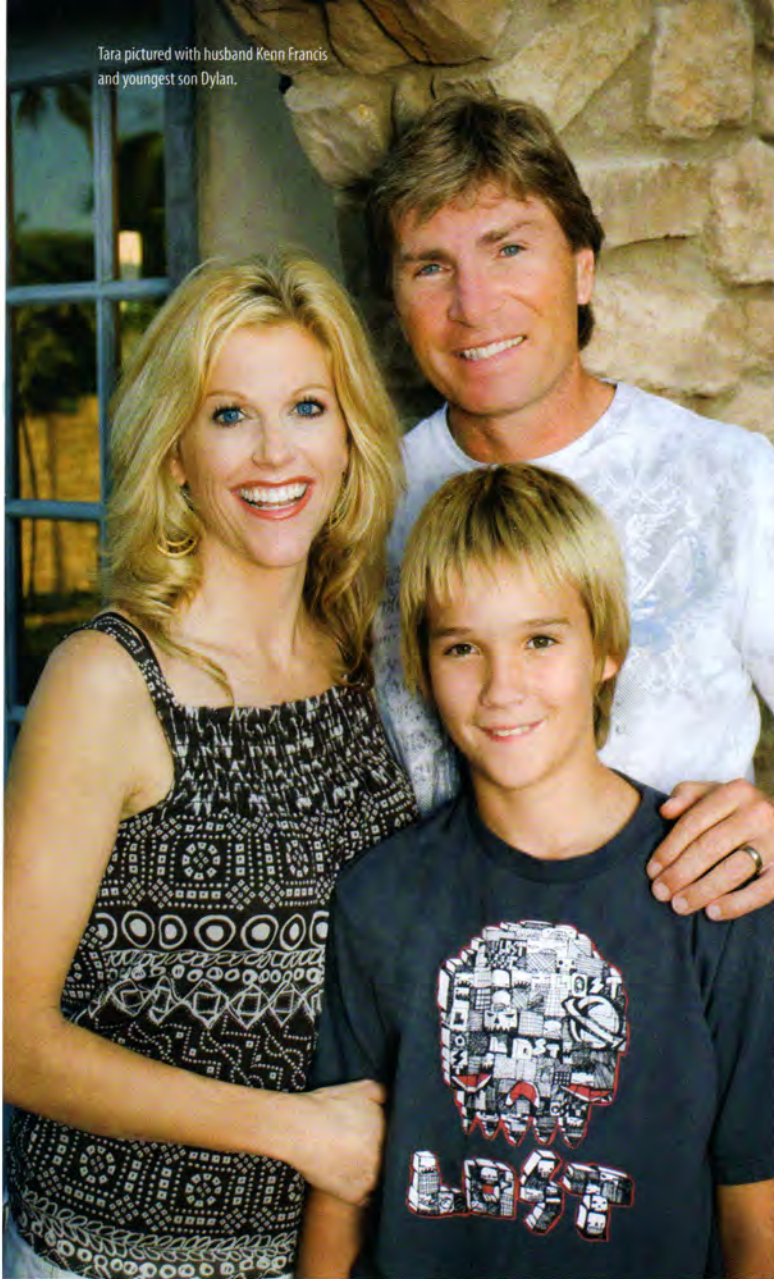
Hitchcock's journalism skills, talent for ad-libbing and perfect comedic timing has helped lead the station to the number one spot in morning news for over 10 years, even ahead of the widely popular "Good Morning America." But even with her exemplary talent, you can bet there are bloopers.

According to Hitchcock, it's not the bloopers themselves but rather how they are handled that make the show a success. She recalls a live interview with author Tom Clancy as a total "mood kill"—admittedly a challenge on such an upbeat show. And when Joan Rivers appeared on "Good Morning Arizona" to introduce her new book on handling grief, the star accused a well prepared Hitchcock of not reading the material prior to the show.

"It was just a brutal interview and I ended it quickly," she says. "It came to the point where I would say 'On page 40 you say ...' because I was determined to prove to her that I read the book. I was mad, and it became my goal to prove that I read this thing!"

Fired up but maintaining her composure, Hitchcock was not prepared for what was to come. For the rest of the morning, the entire on-air

Tara pictured with husband Kenn Francis and youngest son Dylan.



staff—including disc jockeys Tim and Willy from KNIX radio—teased and jabbed at Hitchcock’s interviewing skills and her knowledge of current events, turning an uncomfortable interview into the joke of the day. Playing off Rivers’ earlier accusations, she was met with remarks such as, “You don’t know the forecast, Tara!”

“It became a running joke, and the viewers were great about it,” says Hitchcock. “If you acknowledge this thing is going nowhere and if you have fun with it, people move on and they think it’s fun. If you act panicked and don’t bring it up, that’s when it becomes a bigger deal.”

Her finesse and allowing her natural style to come through is something Hitchcock has mastered over the years. It’s a skill she has worked on and believes others can master as well. “The main advice I can give young people is, you don’t have to look a certain way or sound a certain way,” she says. “Just pretend you are telling a story to your friends—how would you talk? Practice in front of a mirror and be able to tell stories—that’s really all we do.”

TRYING TIMES

As fun as this morning show can be, there are times when serious news takes precedence. Hitchcock cites Sept. 11, 2001 and the days that followed

as some of the most difficult to report. After working 10-hour days, she would go home and “crumble.”

“I did a live shot with a reporter from ground zero and at the end of her shot, she held up a picture of a boy and a drawing with two handprints that said ‘I love you Dad.’ That’s when I kind of lost it,” says Hitchcock. “It was obvious I was choked up, but you are in this zone—you save all your tears for when you are off the camera.”

The other difficult time was after NewsChopper3 and the Channel 15 helicopter collided on July 27, 2007. All four men aboard both helicopters were killed. Hitchcock was in Telluride, Colo., and received the news through an abundance of text messages, first fearing something had happened to one of her step-children.

“I got lucky. I didn’t have to go on the air that day,” she says. “I was spared until Monday. I went on a long hike on top of a mountain and I just sat there and cried. I couldn’t have been in a more beautiful setting thinking about these guys.”

Although Hitchcock and her colleagues are often forced to delay their grief and continue working, she says it’s the viewers who make it all worthwhile. She says they helped her and the Channel 3 team pull through. “People were asking how we were, and the support was amazing and surreal,” Hitchcock says. “That’s really why I feel blessed to be at Channel 3.”

TARA’S FAVORITE CHARITIES:

- * Best Buddies
 - * Childhelp
 - * Fresh Start Women’s Foundation
 - * Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation
-

HER PRIDE AND JOY

While Hitchcock has accomplished a great deal in her career, her greatest joy took place outside the newsroom—meeting her husband Kenn Francis early in 2002. The two began dating later that year, and the courtship led to a surprising marriage proposal on Father’s Day, 2004: Francis and his three children from a previous marriage all got down on their knees and proposed. The kids also accompanied them on their Australian honeymoon.

“The kids are great,” says Hitchcock. “It’s kind of beyond abnormal. You can never give kids too much love; they have three people who adore them and how can that be bad?”

In addition to the joys of a loving family, Hitchcock’s other passions include photography and traveling the world. “My pride and joy in life are my photos,” she says. “I live for taking pictures. It gets annoying for the kids and my husband as I’m asking people to take pictures of us from the back—but I’ve made a ton of scrapbooks.”

Always eager to try new things and explore the unknown, Hitchcock has traveled to many destinations including Peru, Australia, Italy and the Bahamas. It’s on these whirlwind adventures that she collects her notorious rock band t-shirts such as the Red Hot Chili Peppers shirt her fans are constantly catching her in. “I love to travel,” she says. “If I have no money, I will figure out a way to get there. If that means only going to Europe for two days, I will make that flight!”

With a successful career, a new family and worldly travels, just one sentence is all this newscaster needs to sum up her career: “I get paid to tell stories and hang out with my friends—that is my life.” **AW**