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by Eileen P. Duggan
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Fantasy to be TV anchor came true.

Vickie Newton has always been serious about news. When other little girls in tiny Bearden, Ark., were dreaming of becoming princesses, Wonder Woman or movie stars, Vickie dreamed of becoming a TV news anchor.

The evening news was the most popular TV show in the Newton home. In fact, she and her brother Nick named their two puppies Sadat and Begin, after the newsmaking leaders of Egypt and Israel.

"We were such little nerds, and now we delude ourselves and think we're the cool people," she says. "Sometimes you need a fantasy."

Now a seven-year veteran on the KMOV-TV Channel 4 anchor desk, Newton is living her lifelong dream. She co-anchors the 5 and 10 p.m. weekday newscasts with Larry Conners, and often covers the 6 p.m. broadcast as well.

Newton still obsesses over the news, getting it through every source available-- Newsweek, Time, The Economist, The New York Times, CNN.com, MSNBC.com-- "everything," she says. "I mean it's ridiculous. If I miss Meet the Press, I'm downloading." She and her brother still exchange tips on news bits that one of them may have missed.

She started actively pursuing her goal while attending Bearden High School, despite a talent for playing piano. Newton was good enough to accompany the church choir and win piano competitions, but she couldn't see music as a career.

"It simply was a concept I could not grasp," says the soft-spoken, reserved Newton. "I was in a town of 1,200 people. It's hard, I think, for many kids to dream of something

they cannot see. I could see news anchors. I had never seen a concert pianist, so I never made the connection."

While still in high school, Newton worked part-time as a news reader on a local country music radio station. She went on to Arkansas State University, where she earned a bachelor's degree in broadcast journalism in 1987. During college, she worked at a National Public Radio affiliate and after graduation moved on to television at KATV in Little Rock, KMBC-TV and WDAF-TV in Kansas City, and then WDIV-TV in Detroit. Along the way, she married her college sweetheart, but they divorced after eight years.

While in Detroit, Newton did graduate work at the University of Detroit. She then worked in Atlanta at WSB-TV and CNN. Her thesis was on the "back burner" until she arrived at KMOV in January 2002 "and started to create a life with some balance, which is what I treasure most about my life," she says. She completed her master's degree in journalism in 2003.

Misses being a reporter

Now that Newton is an anchor, she misses "the discovering process of reporting and being in the mix of the day's events," she says. "As an anchor, you're somewhat removed because you're in the studio, but the advantage to it is you have a chance to be part of all the stories. When I was younger, I loved getting the interview, getting on the air live, the immediacy of it. I think this is the perfect time for me to be an anchor--I move a little slower, need a little more artificial light. It's worked out well."

At 42, she's been in the business for 21 years, a span that has seen many changes. "I think the biggest challenge for news is maintaining relevance," she says. "I think [KMOV is] doing a good job because we are adapting to what our culture is dictating. The Internet is demanding that we adjust the way we tell the news. Maybe you don't want to watch it on television--that's fine, we'll bring it to you via the net. We'll bring it to you via your telephone. We'll bring it to you. And I think that is born of a commitment to journalism and an awareness that change is inevitable."

She also believes local TV news, in general, is still serving the public. "I think we have corrected an alarming trend toward sensationalism," she says. "We've slowly recalibrated and redefined what is news. Frankly, for a while there we were trivializing the value of news by covering some silly occurrences. I think we have policed ourselves, with a little bit of prodding from the news consumer."

Anchors series on race

One thing KMOV is doing that is far from trivial is "A Shared St. Louis," a six-month series on race relations in St. Louis. Newton anchors the segments, which have appeared in various time slots since August and wrapped up in December.

The series was the brainchild of Scan McLaughlin, executive news director who moved here from Minnesota by way of Tulsa. "It was very courageous of him because it is such an emotional issue, and for a new executive in a new city to want to investigate is impressive," Newton said.

Newton's skill on the job has won her several awards, including Best TV News Anchor by the Riverfront Times in 2002, a Suburban Journals' Women of Achievement award in 2007 and inclusion in the St. Louis Business Journal's 40 Under 40 list in 2006.

The stylish newswoman has used her celebrity to help others by serving on the boards of the Literacy Roundtable, which has established "Vickie's Literacy Fund" in her honor; Opera Theatre of St. Louis; Jazz at the Bistro; the YWCA; the St. Louis Symphony's Community and Education Advisory Board; and several others. She also served on the National Endowment of the Art's Music Panel for the 2007 grants round.

She enjoys chairing fund-raisers and plans to host small fund-raising dinners at her new downtown loft. In the meantime, Newton cooks for friends and family members at her vacation/retirement home on Lake Hamilton near Little Rock. She visits there every month or so, often inviting friends to dinner.

For her favorite escape from the seriousness and intensity of the daily news, Newton goes back to her music, playing the Young Chang grand piano she bought herself for her 30th birthday. "It has always been my little safe haven, and it's one that I wish I had more time to cultivate," Newton says.

She has performed at public events such as the Variety Club telethon and a benefit concert for the St. Louis Children's Choir at Powell Hall. At that concert earlier this year, she played with St. Louis Symphony Orchestra Concertmaster David Halen and soprano Miran Halen. She studies with Peter Henderson, an assistant music professor at Maryville University, and she is currently preparing Grieg's Notturmo for an upcoming performance.

In her perfect life, down the road, Newton envisions spending her days running a voice-over production studio, her evenings cooking and attending shows with a handsome husband (not yet in the picture), and her nights playing piano. She's sure that day will come.

"I believe that we all have a way of eventually finding that place where we truly belong--if you don't faint from the tedium of the journey."

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