



**FUNNY GIRL:**  
Deanna Russo's comedic talents stole the show in an award-winning commercial.

# Riding High

Former Chester resident **Deanna Russo** is ready to parlay her *Knight Rider* fame into more seriously funny roles.

As a child growing up in Chester, Deanna Russo had a grand aspiration: to be a Muppet. "I was obsessed with Miss Piggy. I kind of wanted to be her," Russo recalls. "I liked how she ordered everyone around and wore pink and stuff."

After she went from Muppet to puppet—she played a doll in the Growing Stage's production of *Pinocchio* when she was seven—her dream shifted to one with only slightly better odds: to become a working actress. "I was that girl that if you weren't paying attention to me, I was upset," she says.

Lots of people are paying attention to Russo now. Seven years after moving to Los Angeles, she has appeared on a number of top television shows including *NCIS*, *How I Met Your Mother*, *CSI*, *CSI:New York*, and *Charmed*, and appeared in several TV and straight-to-video movies. In the process, she's learned such valuable skills as how to play a believable corpse ("Shallow breath," she advises), as well as how to survive standing under rainfall for hours in hypothermic conditions ("Heat lamps...towels...and some tea with a little bit of scotch in it").

BY  
**MELINDA NEWMAN**  
PHOTOGRAPHED  
BY **JOHN RUSSO**

Last year, the feisty Russo, 29, landed the holy grail for any actor—a weekly television series. She starred as heroine Sarah Graitman on the revamped *Knight Rider*. The show was cancelled after one season and now, as they say, Russo is spending time “perfecting her craft” by taking improv and writing classes at both the Groundlings and Upright Citizens Brigade between auditions. She recently wrote, directed, and starred in a short film about obsessed *Star Trek* fans on funnyordie.com and directed and produced a web series, reallifewithmarriedpeople.com that is debuting this summer. On a personal note, she went on a goodwill tour to the Middle East this spring with a number of other celebrities, meeting with troops from Afghanistan and Iraq who were enjoying some R&R in Qatar.

Though she now lives in Los Angeles’s Silver Lake neighborhood, a favorite of musicians, actors, and assorted hipsters, her heart is never far from New Jersey. “I normally go back for the holidays or whenever I have a good amount of downtime—I love my mom’s home cooking,” she says, biting into a slice of pizza at the Tomato Pie Pizza Joint, which touts its East Coast roots.

From Chester, Russo moved to Bernardsville, where she took her first acting workshop when she was nine. She modeled as a child for ads in Sunday circulars, but it was in high school where her performing hopes blossomed into reality. She was accepted into Bernards High School’s acting troupe, then helmed by Delores Dellisanti. “We would work on all these experimental projects. For example, one Christmas, we [did] *The Polar Express*. The cool thing is we didn’t have any props, we didn’t have any costumes. It was that abstract kind of theater. [Dellisanti] was pushing us to be incredibly original and unique in ways we couldn’t really appreciate at the time.”

Of course, Russo’s high school is

the alma mater of one Meryl Streep, the patron saint of all actresses and of those from New Jersey in particular. “It’s just my dream to one day meet her,” Russo says. “If I get to hand her a cup of coffee and I don’t have any dialogue, that’s fine. I just need to somehow be in a scene with Meryl Streep.”

Seeking more moderate climes, Russo left the Garden State to attend Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida, where she majored in psychology. While her ability to analyze people helps her in Tinsel Town, she says it was another collegiate experience that prepared her for swimming with sharks: “The number one thing that helped me survive in this town was my experience in a sorority,” she says. “There’s a lot of cattiness and there’s a lot of weird female competitive energy in showing up for auditions.”

Following college, she stayed in Florida just long enough to direct a play at the Orlando Film Festival. “I finish[ed] the run of this show and my car was already packed up. I said goodbye to my actors and started driving out here,” Russo says.

Immediately after arriving, she seemed poised for her big break when she read for the lead in the movie *The Girl Next Door*, a part that ultimately went to Elisha Cuthbert.

“I kind of blew the call back because I was so nervous. I’d already envisioned all these other things happening.” Such as walking down the red carpet at the Oscars, Russo says. “I knew what dress I was going to wear. I had my acceptance speech written.”

As she continued to audition, Russo worked the usual odd jobs, often three at once, familiar to many a struggling actor: hostess at a beer garden, caterer, dispenser of free samples at festivals.

Her first true break came a few years ago when she landed the role of Dr. Logan Armstrong on the *Young & the Restless*, a soap opera she watched with her flight attendant mother while

growing up. Russo tried to imbue her character with an authentic darkness and an emotional distance that supported Armstrong’s tragic back story, only to discover she’d broken the cardinal rule of daytime dramas: always be undressing the person you’re talking to with your eyes. “The better [acting] choice is ‘I want to sleep with you right now. It doesn’t matter that you just killed my dog,’” she says. Her three-year contract amicably ended after four months.

Shortly thereafter she moved on to *Knight Rider*, where her character was a martial arts expert who could solve complicated mathematical algorithms, chase the bad guys in stilettos, and fix her own car, all the while looking smoking hot in a bikini.

Wearing the bathing suit was “the hardest part,” Russo says. “I love food. Being bikini-ready for the camera is [hard] because you have to be 10 pounds less than you would be on the beach. So if you’re someone like me who goes crazy if she doesn’t eat every four hours because of low blood sugar, it’s tough.”

But her sacrifices haven’t been in vain. She’s now achieved something that eluded Miss Piggy: *Maxim* named Russo to its Hot 100 List earlier this summer. She’s gracious enough to seem genuinely conflicted about using her striking good looks to get ahead. “I guess I finally came to the realization that my packaging is temporary,” she says, speaking haltingly, “and I’m not going to feel this way or look this way forever, so I might as well embrace it while I have it. If this is my foot in the door, I need to use it and not resent it—because I did struggle with that.”

That’s because Russo really wants to be a comedic actor as her activities since *Knight Rider*’s demise show. That would be laughable—only because it’s so stereotypical—if she weren’t so hilarious. She swung for the crazy fences in a 2005 Axe commercial, displaying a shameless ability to embarrass herself as her character goofily threw herself at her boyfriend’s father after she caught a whiff of his body spray. The commercial received an award for funniest ad in part because of her over-the-top antics. “Not all actors can make an ass of themselves,” she says. “I just happen to be one of those [that can].”



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