

ALL ACCESS

Nancy O'Dell's golden touch with celebrities has turned **Access Hollywood** into one of NBC's most successful entertainment-news programs

BY HUMBERTO GUIDA

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JACK GUY

Nancy O'Dell walks into the green room on the set of *Access Hollywood* after taping segments for the holidays. She's taller than you might expect and even more stunning in person than she looks on television. When this notion is shared with her, O'Dell acts modest enough to pretend she doesn't hear it all the time. Part of O'Dell's allure is her Southern charm. It's probably due to her integrity that after 13 years as one of the faces of *Access Hollywood*, show business's biggest stars seek her out for interviews.

"The trust issue is a big one. This business is about relationships. They know me," the South Carolina native says. "Celebrities come to me for exclusives because they know that although I won't shy away from the tough questions, they're going to be presented in a fair way. It's not going to be twisted or distorted."

O'Dell's reputation and relationships with the Hollywood elite have been essential to the daily entertainment-news program's evolution. She was part of the original on-air team when the show launched in 1996, serving as weekend co-anchor and weekday correspondent. In 1999, O'Dell was promoted to lead co-anchor. Since then she has been honored with three Associated Press awards and two Society of Professional Journalists awards, and is a seven-time Emmy Award nominee. Today, she is one of the most bankable stars in syndication on one of NBC's most successful franchises. But she remembers when it wasn't so easy.

"In the beginning it was very difficult to get celebrities, especially when we were booking interviews before the show had even aired. Publicists would be wary of certain questions because they didn't know what kind of feel the show was going to have," O'Dell recalls. "No one knew what *Access Hollywood* was. I remember Howard Stern doing a red-carpet interview with us and joking that we'd be off the air in three months. But now everyone knows us, and when celebrities want to break news, they call us. We always have the best spots on the red carpets. It's a different ball game."

It is indeed. For one thing, *Access Hollywood's* domain now goes beyond just show business—particularly last year when the show, and O'Dell, scored high-profile one-on-ones with eventual First Lady Michelle Obama and Cindy McCain. Both women had requested O'Dell, and both interviews were considered coups as major news outlets used *Access Hollywood* clips as lead-ins to their presidential-election stories. She points to her landmark interview with Laura Bush back in 2004, in which the former First Lady specifically asked to be interviewed by O'Dell, as the prelude to those interviews. For O'Dell, who began her broadcast career as a crime reporter for a local television station in her hometown of Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, and then moved on to investigative reporting for an NBC affiliate in Miami, the opportunity to cover the election season was a return to her "serious journalism" roots.

"We did get to cover some serious issues. Politics have been a bigger part of the show. Like Barack Obama, who, let's face it, has some degree of celebrity, right? At least according to John McCain. The politicians like it because we show a different side of them," she explains.

When it comes to covering the likes of Britney Spears and Brad Pitt, O'Dell says shows like *Access Hollywood*, while promoting the entertainment

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DRESS BY LANA FUCHS COUTURE; SKIRT BY MINT BY JODI ARNOLD; BELT BY STREETS AHEAD.

NANCY O'DELL

world, are also there to put celebrity culture in perspective.

“We don’t take ourselves too seriously, and I think celebrities enjoy that. We don’t act like these people are going to change the world or doing brain surgery. It’s not just about feeding their egos,” O’Dell believes.

While the public’s insatiable appetite for celebrity gossip has provided fuel for *Access Hollywood*’s success, O’Dell recognizes that increasing access to the stars has also led to a saturation of entertainment-news outlets, many of them tabloids and rumor mills. She makes no qualms about her concerns over the effects these media are having on her end of the industry.

“There are outlets like TMZ getting celebrities when they leave a restaurant and get into their cars. They try to get them when they leave a party so they get pictures of them drunk,” O’Dell says. “At *Access Hollywood*, we go through three different people just to confirm interviews. We have attorneys, NBC guidelines. We have to be very careful, triple-check our facts. So it’s hard to see that on the Internet people are saying whatever they want. So many of these things are rumors that become news that weren’t news to begin with, but at that point we have to ask about it. But the celebrities are also becoming savvy about it, by using these entities to say things when they don’t want to say it officially. It’s a part of the landscape now, unfortunately.”

On the brighter side is O’Dell’s rising profile as a personality (which got its start back in 1987 when she was crowned Miss South Carolina), and has garnered her cameos in films such as *Thank You for Smoking* and shows like *Dirt*, as well as gigs as host of major events including the Emmy Awards pre-show, USA Network’s *Nashville Star*, the Miss USA pageant, the Miss Universe pageant and last year’s Prism Awards. As for her most important role these days, that’s easy: mother. O’Dell gave birth to daughter Ashby Grace in June 2007 and has two young stepsons, Tyler and Carson, with her husband, technology executive Keith Zubchevich.

“My family is my number-one priority. I say that to every boss here, and that’s the way it should be for everybody,” O’Dell avows. “I was talking about this with Michelle Obama. There she was, supporting her husband for president, flying around the country campaigning—it must have been so hard to juggle it all with being a mom. She said, ‘I just try to deal with the guilt all the time.’ And that totally sounds like my life, because if I go off to work on a story somewhere, I feel guilty I’m not with my daughter. If I turn down work to be with her, I feel guilty I’m not doing the work. So it’s a major balancing act, especially being a mom in this business.”

O’Dell maintains there are many things about being a mother that she didn’t know, which led her to write *Full of Life: Mom-to-Mom Tips I Wish Someone Had Told Me When I Was Pregnant*, out in stores this spring from Simon Spotlight Entertainment. She got the idea to write her own book when friends threw her a baby shower and put together a collection of tips for the rest of her pregnancy, delivery and the first week home with her newborn.

“Things that happened to me were not covered in the pregnancy books, so I was taken by surprise,” recounts O’Dell, who hid her pregnancy on air for three months before breaking the news in the middle of a Will Smith interview. “So I decided to write a book for other women. The information is helpful to men, too.”

When she isn’t anchoring *Access Hollywood* or striving to be the

perfect mom, O’Dell spends time on various charities. She’s a national vice president of the Muscular Dystrophy Association and an ALS (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis) Division celebrity ambassador, and has been working with the division since her mother, Betty, was diagnosed with and passed away from complications relating to the disease. She also serves as a celebrity spokesperson for the March of Dimes and acts as an international board member for Best Buddies, a nonprofit organization dedicated to enhancing the lives of people with intellectual disabilities. Three years ago, O’Dell was honored by her home state when South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford declared February 1st, 2006, statewide Nancy O’Dell Day for her achievements in the media and philanthropy.

With all that work and family to attend to, when O’Dell does make time to have fun, she usually spends it in Vegas. “I love Vegas. I have to go to Vegas a lot for work. We do a lot of interviews with celebrities there, or if they’re performing, we cover that. I make sure my hubby comes with me and we do it up, go to a nice dinner, hit a show. That’s where some of the perks of *Access Hollywood* come in because I can get tickets to most of those

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shows. It makes a great date night,” she says.

O’Dell also shares the Vegas connection to her joining *Access Hollywood* over a decade ago. “When I was still a reporter in Miami, I had met a man who was to become my husband (now ex-husband). He had accepted a job in Las Vegas, so I had to travel back and forth between Vegas and Miami to spend time with him,” she recalls. “So in an effort to be closer to him, I asked my agent to find something for me out West. We told NBC I wanted to be let out of my contract. Instead of letting me out, they said they were putting this entertainment show together and they wanted me to be a correspondent on that show, which was of course *Access Hollywood*. So I guess I have my ex-husband and Vegas to thank for that.”

So where does O’Dell usually stay when in town? “We love The Palms. But I’ll show you the other side of The Palms. I’m not going to party all night—I’m the gal who likes to get the bowling suite. We go in there, and our two stepsons and my baby, and we invite friends and we have our own little party,” O’Dell explains, adding her astonishment at the growth of the city. “I went to Vegas a few times with my parents. There were just a couple of places to go on the Strip, and now the hotels just go on forever. The skyline has exploded. It’s amazing. I guess that’s why all the celebrities love to come to Vegas. Maybe we should move the set of *Access Hollywood* there. I’ll bring it up at the next meeting.” 🍷

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Makeup by Lauren Andersen using M•A•C Cosmetics/celestineagency.com.
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