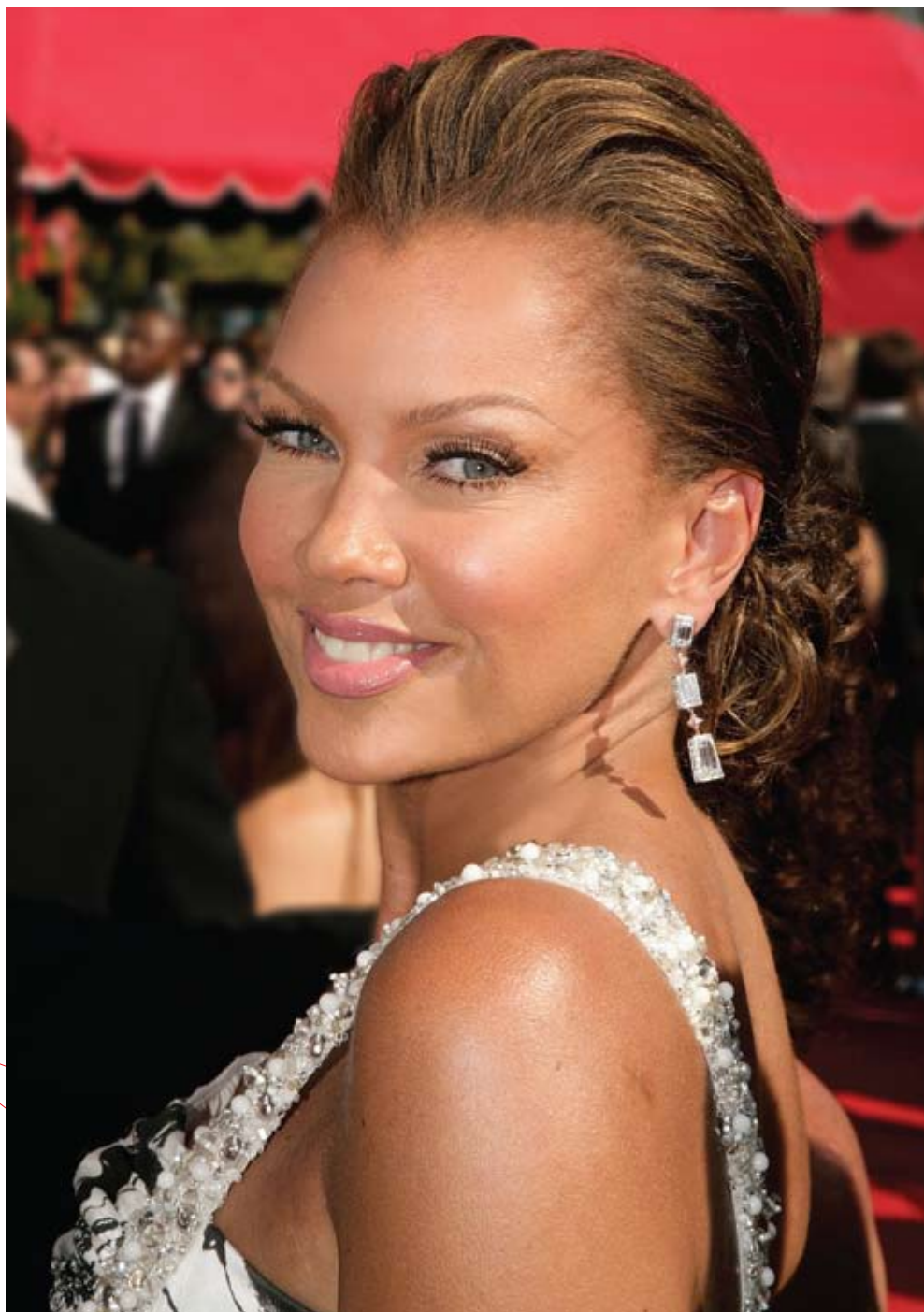


Vanessa: The Real Thing

Vanessa Williams reveals how one woman can have it all... what's in the water in Chappaqua, where she gets her hair done (surprise!), and why Westchester is the best place in the world to live.



BY: JENÉ LUCIANI

During the last 20 years, she's had platinum records, been a hit on TV and Broadway, and received countless awards and accolades for her music and work on the silver screen. **Vanessa Williams** has had the kind of marathon career most entertainers only dream of. Now, as a star on the hit series *Ugly Betty*, she has A-list status and celebrity to burn. All that, and she manages to donate her time to more causes than she cares to mention, including a newly appointed position as a board member and spokesperson for the WESTCHESTER CHILDREN'S MUSEUM. Did we mention she's incredibly beautiful, too? (It's probably slipped your mind, but she burst onto the national scene when she was crowned the first African-American Miss America back in 1983.)

Need any more reasons to envy Vanessa Williams? OK, here you go: She's a mother of four (three by her first marriage to then-manager **Ramon Hervey II**; one by her second marriage to former NBA player **Rick Fox**) and, at age 46, she still looks better than most women half her age. She's been nominated for a Grammy, an Emmy, and a Tony. Oh, and she also has a Bachelor of Fine



Vanessa with co-star America Ferrera at the “Ugly Betty” preview party in New York in September, 2008

Arts from Syracuse University. We could go on but really, what’s the point? She’s a modern-day superwoman who juggles a successful career, motherhood, and celebrity status—all without batting a perfectly made-up eye.

Given her superhuman powers, it was almost reassuring that on the day of our interview, Williams was struggling like the rest of us. The Mt. Pleasant resident was three hours late for our scheduled interview. Icy roads in Westchester prompted a two-hour school delay and Williams had to get her two youngest kids safely off (daughter **Sasha**, age 9, is at GRAFFLIN ELEMENTARY, while son, **Devin**, 16, attends HORACE GREELEY) before heading to *Ugly Betty*’s Queens set for re-shoots (on her “day off”). Always multi-tasking, she called *The WAG*’s office to conduct our interview from the hair and makeup chair.

When asked about her “return to Westchester,” she laughed. “I never really left!” Even though she was commuting to L.A. for the first two seasons of the ABC show, she retained the renovated 1905 cottage in the municipality of Mt. Pleasant that she has owned since 1992. Williams attributes her “groundedness” to her upbringing here in Westchester.

“I was born and raised in Millwood, and it was important to me that my children have the same upbringing,” she says. “It’s one of those communities where not only did my parents have tremendous roots, but it was also a really nurturing environment. Between my parents and the teachers I had at Horace Greeley, a lot of the kids I grew up with ended up very successful. We joke there’s something in the water, but it’s a combination of nature and nurture.”

Williams’ parents were both well-respected music teachers. Dad, Milton, who died in 2006, taught in Elmsford, Mom, **Helen**, in Ossining. “It’s a hard community to duplicate,” Williams says. “Even when you’re in California with great public schools and nice scenery, it’s hard to top this.” Williams has had her cast-mates over for barbecues and says even they are envious of her life here.

“They would always ask me why I didn’t want to live in L.A. or Manhattan. Then they’d come to my home, bring their dogs, run around, and say, ‘No wonder you stayed here!’ I have 5 acres, a great property, a beautiful house, and great schools. Why would I want to leave?”

She plays many roles these days—off-screen she’s a mom and a philanthropist; on-screen she’s the publicist for **Miley Cyrus** in the new *Hannah Montana: The Movie*, and of course, there is Vanessa Williams the singer (her new album, “The Real Thing,” is slated for a May release on the jazz label, Concord). But she’s perhaps best known of late for her role as Wilhelmina Slater, the tough-as-nails and sometimes devious editor of the fictional *Mode Magazine* on *Ugly Betty*. By the way, fans can breathe a tentative sigh of relief: Despite those pesky rumors, as of press time, the show had not been canceled—it was merely on hiatus until May sweeps. Slater is enjoying a steamy love affair with an Australian colleague as well

Even though she was commuting to L.A. for the first two seasons of the “Ugly Betty” show, she retained the renovated 1905 cottage house in the municipality of Mt. Pleasant that she has owned since 1992.

I'm not extravagant. I get my hair relaxed at Sears in the Galleria Mall in White Plains with a hairdresser I've used for 15 years."

as some zany new wardrobe choices, compliments of **Patricia Fields** of *Sex and the City* fame.

While the glamorous Slater enjoys only the finest things in life, Williams prefers to be a bit more understated. "I shop for sweaters and bags at PETTICOAT LANE and wear a lot of the same things over and over again. I'm not extravagant. I get my hair relaxed at SEARS in the GALLERIA MALL in White Plains with a hairdresser I've used for 15 years." But don't let Williams' low-key approach to daily style fool you. When the red carpet calls, she does glamour to the hilt, often landing herself on the "best dressed" lists. And (get ready to resent her), she doesn't get outside help.

"I don't use a stylist," Williams reveals. "I'm fortunate that I can make a call and beautiful gowns



show up at my doorstep. I'll then rely on my eldest daughter **Melanie**'s eye for input. She's a student at the FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY and she's also 21, so she's always completely honest," she says with a laugh.

Williams is a fashion localvore. Many of her high-fashion looks are sourced from Westchester. She's a big fan of fellow Westchester native and designer **Carmen Marc Valvo**, and often wears jewelry from ICD CONTEMPORARY JEWELRY in Chappaqua and DIANA HEIMANN JEWELRY SALON at the RITZ-CARLTON in White Plains. "I was lucky enough to be invited to attend the inaugural ball at the last minute. So, I pulled a vintage Carmen Marc gown out of my closet, and paired it with these big, beautiful pale green chandelier earrings, a big gold and diamond cuff, and a gorgeous ring, all from ICD," Williams explains.

The next big event on Williams' packed schedule is a cause she feels strongly about: The annual gala to benefit the campaign to build the Westchester Children's Museum being held April 4 at the GRAND PRIX NEW YORK in Mount Kisco, where she is being honored. (As of press time, she didn't know who/what she was wearing yet, but we digress.) In January,

Vanessa chats with students from P.S. 164 in Brooklyn at the Young Audiences New York's 7th Annual Children's Arts Awards Gala.

Vanessa's Secret Sources

Now a full-time Westchester resident, Williams doesn't have to leave town to find her favorite restaurant, a great massage, or a new handbag. Here's a roundup of some of her favorite local spots:



Restaurant: "I love 42 on the rooftop at the Ritz in White Plains. I followed chef **Anthony Goncalves** from TROTTERS to 42 and it's just always an incredible meal."

"Quick" mani/pedi: ANA'S NAILS on King Street in Chappaqua.

Massage: NORDIC SPA on Bedford Road in Chappaqua.

Place to buy gifts: ICD CONTEMPORARY JEWELRY in Chappaqua.

Place to shop: PETTICOAT LANE in Chappaqua. "Owner **Phyllis** always has the best selection of tops, sweaters, bags, you name it. I recently bought a winter coat there for my daughter. She's got a great combination of high-end and affordable."



Pictures, top: from 42 at the Ritz in White Plains; **above:** Eric Javits durable and lightweight natural bronze and black patent sturdy skipper bucket shape handbag made of Squishee with Italian leather trim, nautical hardware, and protective feet, \$450. PETTICOAT LANE, 1 King St., Chappaqua, 238-2300.

Williams was appointed to the museum's board of advisers, adding to the laundry list of causes she champions. "Don't ask me to name them all!" she pleads in jest.

Williams is practically a connoisseur of children's museums. "I've been lucky as an actress to travel all over the place, and anytime I've been on a shoot for an extended period of time, being a mom, we end up spending lots of time at the local children's museum. We love the [children's museums] in Chicago, in Vancouver, and Miami. It's one of those things the kids always love to do and want to go back. It's money well spent in an afternoon and it's an education, too."

Naturally, Williams is particularly enthusiastic about the Westchester Children's Museum. The 20,000-square-foot museum and interactive educational center is slated to open late next year at the historic RYE PLAYLAND BATHHOUSES, a spot that has seen the Hollywood spotlight itself, since it served as the backdrop for the 1988 Tom Hanks movie *Big*.

"The location is idyllic," Williams notes. "Right on the water, it has nature, an experience that will allow kids to grow and experience things hands-on. That's what children's museums are all about!"

Williams reveals that the charities she chooses to get involved with have to be something she "connects" with, and perhaps the strongest connection she has in her life is with her children. Unlike many affluent families here in Westchester (and especially one with a busy schedule) Williams does not employ a full-time nanny. A woman named Cathy has helped her out with the children for nearly 20 years and of course, her mom is always nearby to lend a helping hand.

"For a working mom, there aren't enough hours in the day to do everything and do them well. So there are days I'm shooting all day and don't get home 'till 2 in the morning and you have to trust yourself that everything will be fine and not beat yourself up for not being there, and then you make it up on your days off when you are together with your kids," she says.

So what is a day in the life of Vanessa Williams? When posed this question, she pauses, and then responds cheerfully, "It depends on what day it is!" She adds, "Even on Sundays, my life is taking Sasha to swim practice, church, then brunch, so I never get a day off! It's always busy and I'm happy to have such a great life."

"For a working mom, there aren't enough hours in the day to do everything and do them well. You have to trust yourself that everything will be fine and not beat yourself up, and then you make it up on your days off when you are together with your kids."

Get involved with the Westchester Children's Museum!

For more information on how to support the campaign for the Westchester Children's Museum, call 421-5050 or visit www.discoverWCM.org

Upcoming events:

Race to the Finish Gala

April 4, Grand Prix, New York, Mount Kisco

Explore-a-thon: an interactive walkathon for families on the Playland Boardwalk

June 7, Rye