

MIAMI

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 2007 *The Miami Herald*

BUSINESS MONDAY

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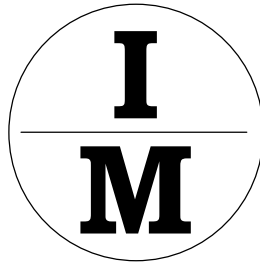
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IRENE MARIE | THE GRANDE DAME OF MODELING, 22



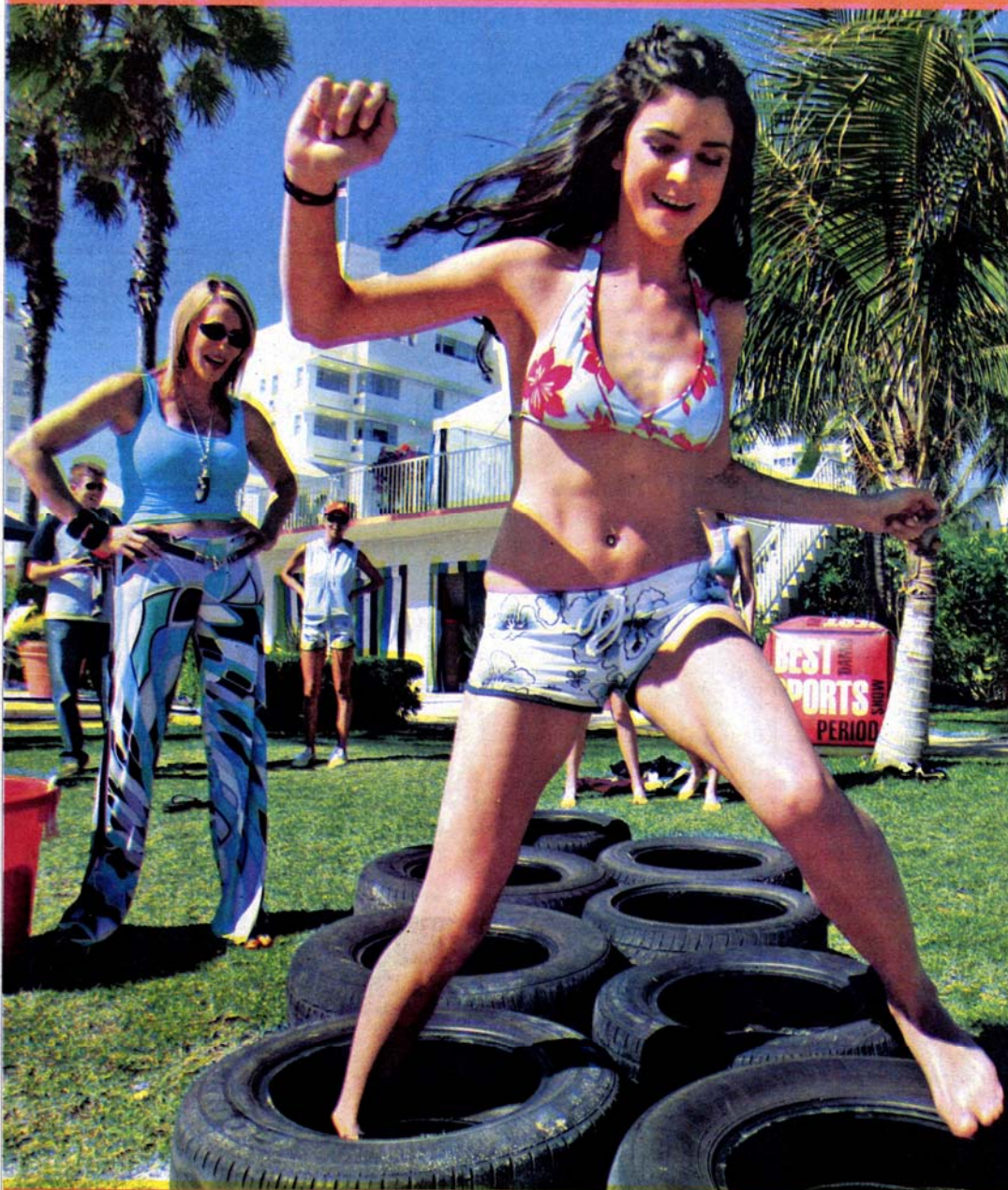
TROPICAL LIFE AND CLASSIFIEDS INSIDE

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'She's definitely the modeling industry diva.'

- GERRY KELLY, South Beach nightclub Impresario

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The grande dame of modeling

Starting from scratch 27 years ago, Irene Marie has created one of South Florida's first and premier modeling agencies

Irene Marie is perched somewhat awkwardly on the tiny top rung of a stepladder, trying to strike a pose for a photographer.

Her arms and legs don't seem to fit neatly anywhere at first, but as the camera starts clicking, her limbs shift into seamless motion. She twists at the waist, cocks her head, hikes a shoulder, lowers her chin. "You're really working me!" she says.

She daintily steps off the ladder in her electric blue shoes. "It felt good," she bubbles. "I don't do that very often."

Maybe not. But at 56, Marie's still got the photogenic, flirtatious flair that sparked a stint as a teenage model and a career running one of South Florida's first and premier modeling agencies, Irene Marie Management Group.

Last spring she and her models were featured in the MTV reality show *8th & Ocean*, named for the location of her South Beach agency. She's now pitching a second series to a half-dozen networks in Los Angeles.

She's appeared as a modeling industry spokeswoman on CNN and produced her own video "websides" to stream on YouTube and the agency's MySpace page. For Super Bowl week, she and a bevy of her lithe-boned beauties taped a segment — the "Best Damn South Beach Model Challenge" — for Fox Sports' *Best Damn Sports Show Period*. And the rerun of *8th & Ocean* here and abroad is spurring a second whirl of publicity — Marie was interviewed last week by New Zealand radio.

"We try to use every opportunity for exposure," she says. Marie's grand plan behind the high profile: to become a brand with her name stamped onto products. "It's a bit too soon," she concedes. "I need the second reality show."

It's the latest move in a 27-year career where Marie has managed to

ride the vagaries of the beauty business with aplomb. Outlasting many agencies — and spurning many buyout offers along the way — she's won status as an icon of Miami Beach glam and glitz and is known as one of the pioneers who got international buzz going about South Beach back in the '80s.

She's also a mother of five children ("with the same man," she hurries to point out), a believer in reincarnation who's given to dashes of extravagance and big-bauble jewelry, and a shrewd wheeler-and-dealer who loves digging in her garden's rose beds.

"She's quite the grande dame of South Florida," says Ed Arenas, president of Miami Beach-based Unique Casting.

By her own admission, Marie is always looking for "the next thing" in the wax-and-wane modeling business, which last year lured 1,330 still photo shoots — worth nearly \$40 million — to Miami-Dade County after several down years.

Back in the early '90s, though, South Beach was the hip spot and agencies like Marie's flourished.

"There was a photo team on every corner," remembers model Tonya Oliver. "The money was good, and you worked all the time."

An ultra-competitive industry by nature, these days elbows are sharper than ever in modeling. Magazines and marketers find they get more sales trac-

tion from using celebrities to grace their covers and ads rather than models' exquisitely sculpted faces.

The opening of Eastern European countries in the '90s, meanwhile, has flooded the market with women bearing a newly exotic look.

"American models used to run the business in Europe," Marie rues, silencing her rhinestone-encased BlackBerry with a stab of a perfectly French-manicured fingernail. "And now the Eastern Europeans come here, too. They've taken a piece of the American model market."

To compensate, Marie has broadened her business over the past five years.

She signs up pro athletes and Latin music stars for sponsorship deals, as well as hairstylists, make-up artists, photographers. She provides image and media consulting services and has even launched a division that focuses on



PHOTOS BY NURI VALLBONA/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

IRENE MARIE

- **Title:** President, Irene Marie Management Group
- **Age:** 56
- **Born:** Miami Beach
- **Career:** Fashion model; founded Irene Marie Model Management, 1979
- **Personal:** Married to Patrick Marie, five children
- **Hobbies:** Gardening, fashion

*TURN TO MARIE, 24

PHOTOS BY AL SHAY/MAMI HERALD STAFF

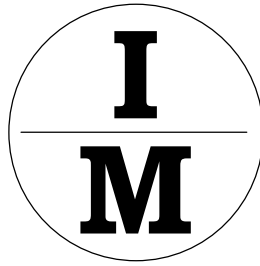
RUNNING THE SHOW: Modeling guru Irene Marie, far left, watches Tyler Ocampo master an obstacle course for a modeling segment on Fox Sports' *Best Damn Sports Show Period*. At right, hairstylist Stacy Gardner grooms models for the show. From left are Raven Davis, Brittany Ann and Lisi Stefan.



• STORY BY CHRISTINA HOAG/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

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MIAMI

COVER STORY

Mixing modeling, mysticism and motherhood

• MARIE, FROM 22

publishing authorized pictorial biographies of the rich and famous.

Her bread and butter, though, remains booking models, from babies to baby boomers, for everything from catalogs to runway shows. Her agency takes the standard 20 percent commission. After *8th & Ocean* aired, the agency was inundated with thousands of portfolios, forcing Marie to hire an extra person to wade through the photos and charge a \$4.99 online submission fee.

Marie's most famous find to date was Pembroke Pines supermodel Niki Taylor, whose mother started sending the agency pictures of her 11-year-old, still in braces. When the girl was 13, Marie brought her in. Fort Lauderdale photographer Scott Teitler remembers Marie telling him, "I just discovered the baby Cindy Crawford."

"She was beautiful," Marie



COURTESY OF IRENE MARIE

TEAMWORK: Running a business and maintaining a family have been challenging, says Irene Marie. Pictured with her are husband Patrick and their two youngest daughters, Antoinette, front, and Stephanie.

recalls, sitting in her white, minimalist-style office. Vases of rose blooms she grows in her garden splash the room with color.

HUGE OPERATION

Marie's multimillion-dollar

agency, which employs 18, represents roughly 1,500 faces around the world — about 850 are full-time models — and some 1,800 clients, ranging from magazines to advertising agencies. She started with none.

MIAMI MODELING

Modeling is big business in Miami, both in terms of the number of shoots and in expenditures.

Year	No. of shoots	Expenditures
2000	1,247	\$36.7 million
2001	879	\$25.4 million
2002	810	\$28.7 million
2003	829	\$20.4 million
2004	887	\$25.7 million
2005	1,330	\$36.7 million
2006	1,329	\$39.5 million

SOURCE: Miami-Dade Mayor's Office on Film & Entertainment

Marie's story begins, fittingly enough, in Paris at age 19. Born in Miami Beach, she moved to Europe with her mother and step dad, a Pan Am pilot, when she was 10. Even back then, fashion was a magnet. "Ever since I was a little girl, I loved clothes," she recalls.

Standing five-foot eight and a half, she was often

urged to try modeling. So she did, much to her parents' chagrin. It was a short-lived career in which she was alone and adrift. She returned to Florida, and met and married French entrepreneur Patrick Marie.

MOMMY DUTY

By her late 20s, she had two daughters and had had enough of wiping drool-drenched chins: "I was bored to tears."

A cousin of her husband's who owned a modeling agency in Paris visited South Florida, loved it as a photo-shoot location and suggested that Marie open an agency. After a month in Paris learning the business side, Marie opened her agency in Fort Lauderdale in 1979.

"I became passionate about it," she says. "I discovered it wasn't the business I didn't like in Paris, it was the environment. There was no phi-

• TURN TO MARIE, 25

COVER STORY

Irene Marie runs multimillion dollar agency

*MARIE, FROM 24

losophy of guidance for the girls."

Marie amassed a stable of photo-friendly faces, scrutinizing young women wherever she happened to be. That eye is something she never turns off.

"I can see this is a catalog girl, this is a high-fashion girl," she says. "I started discovering a lot of great girls. In Publix, Toys R Us, wherever I was, I was looking."

In 1989, Marie moved the agency to South Beach at a time when there was little around except rundown hotels. She and her husband bought the Ocean Drive building where her office is still located for \$255,000. It's now worth several million.

MORE THAN MODELING

Marie made much of her reputation with teen models, whom she mothered as well as mentored. "They're juggling being kids with this adult world," she says. "The biggest myth is that this is glamorous. They find out it's hard work."

Models who have worked with her say her door was always open for giving advice about boyfriends as well as career moves. She makes a point to attend models' weddings, baby showers and the like.

"She's always been very accessible, very loving and willing to give," says model Bachi Frost, who has worked with Marie for two decades. "I was alone when I first came to Florida. Irene was like an older sister to me."

As much as her models know her as a mother hen, her business associates know her as a fierce negotiator.

"She's tough but she's an amazing tactician," says Arenas, the casting director. "She knows how to work a deal so everyone wins."

Photographer Teitler remembers his first dealings with her years ago when she asked him to photograph her models exclusively. He agreed but soon found he wasn't getting enough work and needed to sign with other agencies.

"I went to her and said 'This isn't really paying my bills,'" he recalls. "She told



NURI VALLBONA/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

LEADING AN EMPIRE: Irene Marie's agency represents roughly 1,500 faces around the world - about 850 are full-time models - and some 1,800 clients, ranging from magazines to advertising agencies. She started with none.

me 'Get a job as a waiter' - and I did! I was sucked in by that charisma and presence of her. Irene has always had a way of making other people want what she wants."

GURU AIR

Marie exudes poise, elegance, charm, but also a mystical quality that seems at odds with her business of peddling that most shallow of commodities - beauty.

"Beauty is just a gift that you're born with." She falls into Zen-speak and gestures with a hand. "That's the structure you needed for your journey in life. Our most important reason for living is to learn our soulfulness."

Wait, is that a .. tattoo on her palm?

She laughs and opens a fist to display a blue star tattoo. She reaches into a silver box on her desk and extracts a blue cardboard star with "The star of the heavens, God loves you" penned on it.

"Well, I'll tell you," she says.

The blue star is a symbol of Mary of the Heavens, an early Christian who defied traditional female roles to preach the Gospel of Christ in southern France. Marie is writing a book on the woman's life and

'She's always been very accessible, very loving and willing to give.

- BACHI FROST, a model who has worked with Marie for two decades

hands out the cardboard stars to panhandlers and passersby as a reminder of God's love. "I took on her mission," she says. "I felt compelled to do it."

It's just one manifestation of Marie's flair for the theatrical.

Barbara DiPrima, who heads Prima Casting in Miami, recalls the time when Marie asked her where in the United States she'd like to go to dinner that night. "New Orleans," DiPrima answered offhandedly.

At 5 p.m. a limo picked her up and whisked her to a waiting private jet. Destination: the Big Easy. "We went to a fabulous restaurant and walked around the French Quarter," DiPrima says. "We landed back in Fort Lauderdale around 3 a.m. It was beyond imagination, but that's Irene."

Longtime agency model Kasey Langston remembers Marie pulling up to the office in a Rolls-Royce. As she gaped, Marie tossed her the

keys, telling her "go for a spin."

Marie smiles when recently reminded of the incident. "It's just a car," she says.

BALANCING ACT

As her agency ballooned in size and stature, so did Marie's family. She has four daughters and a son, ranging from an 11-year-old sixth-grader to a 28-year-old physician.

She readily admits that she couldn't have managed her business through the years without two full-time nannies and an accommodating husband.

"There are times I think I can't take another day," she says. "I've thought about giving up the business, I've thought about giving up motherhood. I've had crises with my kids, I've had challenges with my husband."

How does she cope? "I pray every day. That's how I make it."

Staying married wasn't easy at times. In the mid '90s,

Marie opened an agency in New York and was spending half her time there. At the same time, her traditional Catholic beliefs shared by her husband metamorphosed into a broader concept of spirituality embracing reincarnation and many other religious elements.

Realizing her marriage was teetering and finding New York competition ruthless, Marie closed the Big Apple agency and returned full-time to Miami to reconcile with her husband. "He liked me the way I was," Marie says. "It took a long time to work through."

The couple, who live in Miami's Bay Point section in an old house dotted with globe-trotting tchotchkes, have been married 34 years. Patrick, described by those who know him as funny, entertaining and "very French," is retired. "I can't imagine one being without the other," says model Langston.

IN CHARGE

Marie is in her Mother Superior role - getting the models ready for a taping, handing out bikinis, adjusting shorts so panties don't show, ascertaining who's had hair and makeup done.

She's also fighting jet lag from a trip to Amsterdam, where she visited her son and met his new girlfriend.

In a business where teenage years are the prime, she admits that aging has been difficult sometimes. "I think Botox is wonderful," she says. "If it's non-invasive, why not do it? But emotionally and mentally, I'm comfortable with my age. You couldn't pay me to be 25 again."

Marie shows no signs of tiring. She's constantly got new projects in the hopper - next up, a model recruiting initiative on the Internet. Details to come in May.

She would also like to get more publicly involved in the campaign against anorexia in the modeling industry, which she has seen firsthand several times.

"She's definitely the modeling industry diva," says South Beach nightclub impresario Gerry Kelly. "Agencies come and go, but Irene is at the top of her game."