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It was around that time, at age 13, that she first hit the stage, performing in Civic Little Theatre productions of *Arthur and the Magic Sword* and *The Night Before Christmas*. She enjoyed it while it was happening, but admits that she never really looked beyond her own backyard.

“I never dreamed I would be where I am today, because I just didn’t think it was possible,” says Bittner. “I didn’t dream big at all.”

At 18, Bittner was living in the Lynnville Hotel outside Kempton for \$20 a week, bartending at the hotel two nights a week while working full-time at a sewing mill across the street. Then one day, she walked Karl Bittner.

“It was just like *An Officer and a Gentleman*,” Bittner says, of the way her future husband swept her off her feet. “He whisked me away to this greater downtown metropolis (Bethlehem), and I felt like I could finally breathe again.”

Fast-forward. Bittner, age 29 and the mother of two children, Sarah and Adam, is sitting in the beauty parlor covering her gray.

“I started going gray at 21,” she says. “By age 30, I was white. It’s the Phil Donohue syndrome that runs in my family.”

A woman approached and asked if Bittner had done any modeling. Bittner laughed, but took the woman’s card. Later, after talking with her husband and children, she decided to call. An interview and audition followed, and she got a job doing a local bridal show.

“Bridals by Sandra,” Bittner says. “I was there with a bunch of 20-year-old girls. It was a riot.”

Changing Direction

At the time of the bridal show, Bittner was enrolled at Northampton Community College, taking nursing, chemistry and biology classes. She had been a La Leche League leader for years, and had already sat for and passed the lactation consultant’s exam. She viewed lactation consulting as a way to give back to the community what she had received in the way of help raising her children. But with a budding acting and modeling career looming, Bittner detoured into the school’s communications program.

“I’m interviewing every single day, sometimes three times a day, and with each role you have to be able to take

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Bittner’s Balancing Act Keeping Family & Career In Perspective

On any given day, Valerie Bittner could find herself whacked in the head with a tire iron and stuffed into a garbage dumpster. Or she could get lathered with soap and cold water while riding through a car wash on the hood of an automobile.

Sound dangerous? Not to Bittner, who laughs when recalling how often she was blown off the hood of the car during the filming of a car wash commercial. “I wanted to do more,” she says.

That’s the view Bittner, a Bethlehem resident, has of her acting and modeling career. Her face lights up and her smile stretches from ear to ear when she talks about the diverse roles she’s played over the last 15 years. It’s a career, she explains, that literally came out of nowhere.

The Greatest Discovery

Bittner was born in Iselin, New Jersey and laughs when she says, “You can take the girl out of New Jersey, but you can’t take the Aqua Net out of the girl. We buy it by the case.”

Her family moved to New Tripoli when she was eight and shortly thereafter to Stony Run, a town Bittner likens to the one on the television show, *Petticoat Junction*. “The general store was in the front, and

on that person," Bittner says. "Playing a doctor is much different from playing a drug addict or a murder victim. So how do you approach that communication-wise? And how do you convey to the casting director that you are perfect for the part?"

Bittner's career began to grow. She was a ring girl for ESPN boxing events and did lingerie shows for Larry Holmes' wife, Diane. But even as the job offers increased in number and frequency, she never lost sight of her main job.

"I was a mother first, that was my role," says Bittner. "I was always available for dance class and little league. I approached acting and modeling as, 'I'll do this for as long as they'll have me, but I'm always going to put my family first.'"

Fifteen years later, her children grown- Sarah is 22 and lives in Washington, DC, Adam is 19- Bittner is still in demand.

"I figured every job was going to be the last job; how long could I possibly do this?" she asks rhetorically. "If you would have told me at age 34 that I would still be doing this at 44, I would have laughed in your face."

Keeping It In Perspective

One thing that Bittner has learned over the years is to strike a healthy balance between her acting career and home life. As an example, she points to her first movie role where, as a principal character in the film, she was routinely treated like royalty every minute she was on the set.

"It's fabulous," she says. "Then I get home from shooting all day, I'm as high as a kite, and as I pull in the driveway, Adam is in a full-fledged fist-fight on the front lawn with the neighbor's kid, and Karl asks me what's for dinner. I thought, 'I'm going back to the set; back to that wonderful surreal life.'"

Bittner, however, has kept it all in perspective.

"You feel a lot like Dorothy; you have to go back to Kansas," she says. "You learn to balance the two. But it's great that I get to go to Oz often. I have a return-trip ticket. That is very cool for me."

And if she had to walk away from acting and modeling tomorrow, Bittner says she

could do so with no reservations. "Because I've always been realistic," she says. "[Acting and modeling] is not my life on a day-to-day basis. But the little time I can steal away, it's fun."



New York City, 10th Avenue, (1997) by Fadil Beriska

Photo By John Sterling Ruth
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Valerie Bittner

Model/Actress • Communications GRAD

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