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making dreams
come true

Mary Therese Friel

MAKING *Dreams* come true

BY MARGARET MADIGAN
PHOTOS BY STEPHEN REARDON

Wow. From the minute you walk in the door of Mary Therese Friel, LLC Modeling Agency and are greeted by Mary Therese herself, you feel the energy. Not just her vibrant energy that portrays a woman on the go, a tireless woman with work to do but also a positive energy that's infectious and makes you feel like anything is possible. And that's what Mary Therese believes, "Dreams can come true."

A native of Pittsford, NY, Friel was approached by a neighbor at 11 years old who said, "You should be modeling." The neighbor, who worked at Kodak spoke to her Father and suggested he take her to Kodak to see about doing some modeling. In those days Kodak used models frequently for advertising, brochures, catalogs, promotions, etc. She then became a "Kodak Girl." Her parents gave her permission to model as long as her wages went toward funding her college education.

After high school she started her college career at St. John Fisher, where she eventually earned a degree in communications. Friel recalls walking down the hall of a campus building one day and saw a sign that read, "You Can Be Miss Universe" and she recalls with a chuckle, sarcastically thinking, "Oh good that's great, thanks." Mary Therese was an accomplished equestrian and was aiming for the Olympics, pageants weren't previously a part of the plan. "Horses get in your blood", she says, but decided to take down the number anyway. When she called, she was told that the first step would be participating in the Miss New York pageant. She signed up to be a part of the Upstate contingent, and each girl entered was given a title. Unfortunately "Miss Rochester", "Miss Pittsford" and any other word relating to the vicinity was taken so she was given the title of "Miss Barge". Yes, "Miss Barge."

She remembers being very disappointed at her title but her father, who was ever the optimist, told her to look on the bright side as it was the only title with just one syllable. Dolores and William Friel were always a source of inspiration and optimism for Mary Therese and her sister Candy. Friel believes that the positivity instilled in her is what enabled her to have a successful pageant career and now modeling agency.

Mary Therese Friel, LLC first opened its doors in 1987. It began as a small modeling agency, pageant consultancy and a self-development coaching facility for teenage girls. As it still is today, the focus was on the development of the whole person. She runs the business with her husband of twenty years, Kent Friel.

Back to Miss Barge... After deciding on a lark to compete in the Miss New York Pageant and carpooling down to the Catskills with ten other Upstate NY competitors just looking for a fun adventure, Friel won the title of Miss New York 1978. She was honored and tickled to death. Then after the pageant one of her handlers said, "Now onto Miss USA!" to which she answered, "Wait, what?"

Friel asked what that meant and was told she would be going to Biloxi, Mississippi to compete in the Miss USA pageant against winners from the rest of the United States. She soon started to realize



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winners from the rest of the United States. She soon started to realize she had become a part of something that was much bigger than she had anticipated. But she was still just enjoying the ride. "I had a let's see where this takes me attitude", she said and went off to Florida to do some minor preparation. In that era there was not a focus on being super skinny or super fit, having just a soft, slightly curvy body was perfectly lovely. So basically "not getting fat" was the goal. Oh how times have changed.

After Friel arrived at the Miss USA pageant facilities, they showed a video of all the fabulous cash and prizes and opportunities that the crown would bring - cash, fur coat, piano, car, jewelry. That's when she finally got the competitive bug, "Up until that point I had just been riding the wave and having a ball, now I wanted it, but still realized if I didn't get it, no big deal, some other nice girl would," she recalls. However, being a religious woman, she decided to put it in God's hands at that point and after that an odd thing happened, she felt at peace and calm. The night before the pageant she had a dream that she won and remembers feeling so disappointed when she woke up and realized it was just a dream. Little did she know that night her dream would come true.

Friel was crowned Miss USA 1979. Soon a whirlwind of press junkets, appearances, parties, speaking engagements, and receptions would overtake her life. A whole new world was opened up to her, one of celebrities, dignitaries, and powerful businessmen and never having to wait behind a velvet rope again. She mingled with and became friends with the likes of Julio Iglesias, Cher, Elton John, Kris Kristofferson and Mohammad Ali. The parties were all very exciting but she really enjoyed the community service work. And it was an autographed picture from Mohammad Ali that was a turning point and remains a pillar in the core of her values... the inscription read, "Service to others is the rent we pay for our room in the hereafter." Words she still lives by.

As Miss USA, Friel continued on to the Miss Universe pageant held in Perth, Australia to compete against contestants from 74 other countries. She was a semi-finalist and ended up placing sixth. That was a wonderful memory and an amazing experience for her.

When her reign as Miss USA ended, Friel continued her modeling career. She modeled off and on over the years since her "Kodak Girl" days, in between pageants, so it seemed like a logical continuation. She lived in New York City and frequently travelled the world with her modeling career - London, Paris, Milan, and Tokyo. However the need

to serve others was always lingering in her heart. So was the need to find "home". Her parents had since left Rochester to go back to their roots in Philadelphia, so always being very close to her family, she decided to move there.

Friel became a school teacher in Center City, a particularly rough area of Philadelphia. She loved her job there but after three years the funding dried up. Now what? She loved being near her parents but it still didn't feel like home. Where was home? Her heart always came back to Rochester. So in 1986 she packed up her belongings, moved to Mendon, bought a horse farm, and opened up a clothing boutique in Pittsford.

Again something wasn't quite right. Her store was doing well and she enjoyed working in fashion but stated she does not have the personality to stay put in a store all day. However, as things usually go for Friel her future just naturally unfolded in front of her. As she was minding her store, parents would ask for coaching tips for their girls participating in pageants and aspiring models would ask for her secrets of breaking into the business. It soon became apparent that was what she was supposed to do, use her talents to help others realize their dreams.

In 1987 Mary Therese Friel, llc Modeling Agency was born and she has never looked back. The company has grown into a full-service modeling agency with a complete training program. The company represents men, women, teens, children, and seniors and has built a long and impressive list of clients and credits. The company offers placement in the areas of print, television, radio, film, videos, industrials, theater, runway, testing, promotions, fundraisers, trade shows and special events.

In her role as pageant coach, Friel has had eighteen winners in eighteen years. Most recently she coached Candace Kuykendall, a student at St. John Fisher and Rochester native, to become the current Miss New York. Most importantly she will only coach girls who are interested in becoming a better person as a whole. "I won't put up with attitude. Beauty and poise is a gift, and it is to be used for good", says Friel.

Friel's husband Kent joined the business as a full partner in 1995. In 1998 the company began experiencing dramatic growth, including expanded bookings and higher visibility. She attributes that to an excellent reputation and a strong work ethic, and credits her husband for taking the company from local to national and international levels. However she still maintains that they are just a "Mom and Pop shop." "He is the love of my life, my business partner, my best friend, my soul mate, my everything", Friel says of her husband.

Business is booming and the company is expanding yet again. They have just moved from operating out of their in-home office and studio into a new facility at 20-102 Assembly Drive in Mendon. It's a beautiful multi-level facility with multiple spaces for studios, offices and classrooms. Mary Therese and Kent believe this space will be better equipped to handle their over 300 worldwide clients. "We're never retiring, we enjoy it too much", a sentiment shared by both Mary Therese and Kent.

For more information on the Mary Therese Friel, LLC Modeling Agency visit www.mtfmodels.com.