



Photographs by
SAMI DRASIN



VANNA WHITE

HAPPINESS AFTER HEARTBREAK

AFTER SUFFERING DEVASTATING LOSSES, THE *WHEEL OF FORTUNE* STAR LEANED ON FAITH AND FANS TO COPE. NOW SHE'S IN LOVE—AND STILL SMILING

By **GILLIAN TELLING**

HAIR: TONYA LIE; MAKEUP: JEFF JONES; INSET: DOUGLAS KIRKLAND/CORBIS/GETTY IMAGES

The Hostess at Home

“When I was 10, I realized I wanted to be on TV someday,” says White (at her house in Beverly Hills in August). Inset: White on *Wheel* in 1987.

The Vanna White you'll

find at her home, casually sitting on an overstuffed couch with her gray tabby Stella purring happily by her side, is very different from the Vanna White who appears in American homes night after night, dressed to the nines in designer gowns and high heels, turning letters on *Wheel of Fortune*—a job she's now been doing for 37 years and counting. Stunning with no makeup and her hair slicked back into a wet bun, the off-camera White, 62, prefers crocheting (she even has her own line of yarn) and doing jigsaw puzzles to glamming it up. “This is pretty much me,” she says with a laugh. “No makeup, cat on my lap. I have a very simple life.”

Despite her humble demeanor, White remains one of America's most recognizable TV personalities—*Wheel of Fortune* draws more than 9 million viewers nightly and has taped more than 7,000 shows to date. She still remembers auditioning for it like it was yesterday. “I got the call in 1982, the day before Thanksgiving,” she says. In the early '80s the former beauty queen from the tiny town of Conway, S.C., had moved to L.A. to further her modeling career. “They put three women on the air for a week to see how the audience responded to us all. I didn't think I had any chance of get-



← **Tragic Loss**

In 1986 White's fiancé, actor John Gibson, died in a plane crash, leaving White devastated. "The outpouring of love from *Wheel of Fortune* fans helped me a lot," she says.

ting it. [Host] Pat Sajak will say I was the most nervous—my lips were quivering, and my knees were literally shaking because I wanted the job so badly." It turned



FOUR DECADES OF FASHION

"I've worn over 7,000 gowns over the years," White says, noting that they're all borrowed. "Designers will send about 40 options, and we choose the top 12 because we tape 12 shows in two days. The shoes are all mine, though. I prefer the cocktail-length dresses so I don't have to worry about tripping."

'I've been doing this a long time... so if someone still wants my autograph, it feels good!'

when she became pregnant with their first child and announced it via a puzzle on the show. (The answer was "Vanna's Pregnant.") A week later she miscarried. "I so wanted to be pregnant and have a baby, so then when I finally got pregnant, I wanted to tell the world immediately," she says. "Obviously I lost the baby, which was devastating after announcing it. The good news is I was able to get pregnant again and had two beautiful, healthy children. . . . But losing a child—there's nothing good about that." White says she once again turned to friends, family and fans. "You have to take their support and try to be strong. It's so

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: WALTER MCERDIE/GETTY IMAGES; RON SILBERZAK/STEPHEN GRISSE; ASTRID STAWIAK/GETTY IMAGES; CAROL KAELESON; CALHOUN PRODUCTIONS, INC. (4)



Family Matters
"I talk to them all the time and visit them all the time," says White of kids Gigi, 22, and Nikko, 25 (with White's boyfriend of seven years, John Donaldson).



out she and Sajak had the kind of chemistry the show's creator, Merv Griffin, was hoping for. "He said it was like a brotherly and sisterly chemistry," she says. "And to this day Pat and I have never had an argument. Well, we had one over putting ketchup on a hot dog. He said you don't do that because he's from Chicago. But that's honestly been our only fight in 37 years."

White fell into the role—and the fame that came with it—easily, but four years later her world was turned upside down when her fiancé, *The Young and the Restless* actor John Gibson, died in a plane crash. "It was May 17, 1986," she recalls. "The second I heard about it, I fell to my knees. It was just devastating." White credits the outpouring of love from fans with helping her cope. "I heard from so many people who had shared the same experience of losing someone instantly in an accident, and that really helped me. I didn't feel like I was alone. Because when something like that happens, you immediately think you're the only one."

White later wed restaurateur George Santo Pietro in 1990, but tragedy struck again in 1992

hard, but you just have to think, 'What would they want me to do?'" She also embraced her faith. "I'm a Christian and have always had my own personal relationship with God," she says. "I don't preach about it, because everyone's entitled to their own beliefs. But I pray. I pray every day."

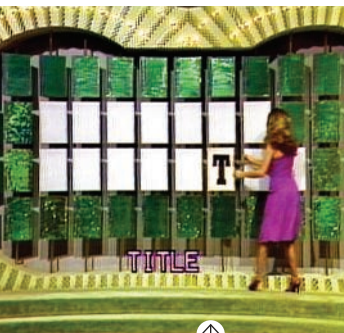
After White and Santo Pietro split amicably in 2002, White found love again seven years ago with her now live-in boyfriend, real estate developer John Donaldson, 53, whom she met when a friend

'I do chuckle inside when people get very wrong answers, but you also feel bad because they're so nervous'

brought him to one of her barbecues. "I remember looking at him and thinking, 'He's really cute,'" she says with a laugh. "We ended up talking for a long time that night." They've been together ever since. "It just works," she says of their breezy relationship. "He lets me be me, I let him be him. There is no drama." White is also embracing her new life as an empty nester, as son Nikko, 25, is studying agricultural science and daughter Gigi, 22, is also a college student. That transition, she says, was difficult. "I've just gotten over the sadness of that," she admits. "I was a hands-on mom, and then you're like, 'Now what?' But the kind of unconditional love that comes from parenting—nothing is better."

As for what's next—other than hoping to improve her golf game and continue traveling the world with Donaldson when not taping *Wheel*, which films approximately six shows a day, two days a week—White has no plans to retire anytime soon. "I currently have three more years on my contract," she says. "But I love my job. I love everything about it. The people I work with, many of us have been here 20-plus years. I've watched young kids out of college now have kids of their own. We're one big family. It's wonderful." She adds with a smile, "I'm very happy in life." ●

MEMORABLE MOMENTS ON-SET



Vanna's First Show
Vanna turns her first-ever letter—a "T" please, Pat—on the puzzle board in 1982.



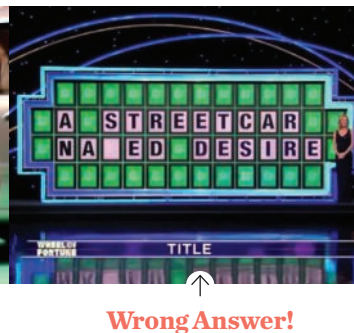
Prize Funny
White and Sajak pretend to be naked in a hot tub that was on display for contestants to purchase with their winnings, in 1987.



Vanna and Pat's Friendship
"Our families vacation together," White says of her closeness with show host Sajak—whom she clowned around with at the show's close in 1991.



The Hair Incident
In 1995 Sajak cut a lock of White's hair on the air—on the following episode, she debuted a new (and planned), much shorter do.



Wrong Answer!
In 2017 a contestant had almost all the right letters for the play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, but he instead asked for a "K." "You can't help but laugh," White says.



Home Sweet Home
Wheel gives away a home annually, which White (with Jimmy Buffet and 2019's winner) calls "amazing."