They don’t come much more local than Robin Sewell, executive producer and host of “Arizona Highways” television. During the show’s six years of existence, this award-winning journalist and mother has been all over our beautiful state exploring nooks and crannies you’d never think to visit otherwise. And as if her television career weren’t enough, Sewell devotes an enormous amount of time and energy to a wide range of Valley charities. Yet for her, it’s all in a day’s work.

STORY BY MORGAN BENAVIDEZ / PHOTOGRAPHY BY RJ COOK PHOTOGRAPHY / MAKEUP BY JULIA VENEGAS / HAIR BY JENNY STREBE
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Robin Sewell Explores Arizona
Chatting with Sewell, it’s obvious that she has a special place in her heart for Arizona. “You can be lying by the pool during the day if you want, then go see the green ponderosa pines or be somewhere totally different within an hour,” she points out.

But Sewell never envisioned her present career when she was starting out professionally. In fact, she majored in theater at UCLA and pursued an acting career before turning to the world of broadcast journalism. While staying busy with auditions, Sewell waited tables. Just when she was becoming jaded with the unforgiving nature of show business, she received some advice from the late Hal Fishman, a premier LA anchor who came to know her after frequenting the restaurant; he suggested she forge a career in broadcast journalism.

With that, the wheels were set in motion. Sewell moved in with her father in Arizona and obtained an internship with Channel 10, where she got her first taste of the news world. The road was not without speed bumps; she laughingly recalls a mortifying experience that she says almost brought her TV career to an abrupt end.

“Back then—and this will date me—they used to have paper prompers. One of the jobs of the intern was to run the paper prompter [for the nightly news].”

One night while Sewell was running the prompter, the machine got stuck, bringing the news reading to a halt. Needless to say, the befuddled anchor was not happy.

“You should’ve heard the language going on in that newswroom,” Sewell says. “Basically, he said, ‘Get that intern out, she’ll never work in this business a day in her life!’ So I thought that was the end of my career, but it actually turned out to be the beginning.”

Several years later, Sewell was working in Phoenix as head anchor at ABC15. The station was casting auditions for a new male anchor and she received an unexpected blast from the past. “The anchor from when I was an intern called inquiring about the job and said, ‘I really like that Robin Sewell—she was a really great intern,’” Sewell laughs. “How ironic is that?”

Despite the embarrassing incident, Sewell flourished in her news career and continued to advance. Even though she is talented in her own right, she credits the many mentors she’s had over the years for helping her to achieve success.

“I will tell you that mentorships are everything,” Sewell says. “If it weren’t for mentors in every aspect of my life—when I was a newscaster and starting my own business beginning ‘Arizona Highways’ television—I truly believe I wouldn’t be where I am today.”

One of her most influential mentors, Jim LeMay, gave Sewell her first on-air assignment. “I did the Arizona International Auto Show,” she says. “I’d never been on the air before—it was like throwing someone into the fire. But he just said, ‘You have to do it.’”

In addition to knowing the right people, Sewell points out that you must be able to recognize your own shortcomings and seek help. “It is very much about relationships, but it’s also about having the courage to admit that you don’t know what you don’t know and not feel intimidated.”

STAYING GROUNDED

Throughout her career as a news anchor, television host and business owner, Sewell has met some highly famous and influential people. Her most memorable interaction happened with country singer Garth Brooks on “Arizona Highways” television.

“I’ve had a great opportunity to interview so many incredibly high profile, interesting, significant people in the country and world, but what I remember about Garth Brooks so vividly is that he was such a real, down-to-earth person,” Sewell says.

While visiting with Brooks off camera, Sewell happened to share that her mother had recently been diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease. “He was so compassionate and thoughtful and so interested in my story,” Sewell recalls. “This was a man who didn’t even know me, but I really felt he was incredibly genuine; this was not phony whatsoever.”

Sometime later, Sewell had a reason to call Brooks for an unrelated matter. She was touched by what he said. “He stopped the conversation in mid-sentence and said, ‘Robin, I owe you an apology … how selfish of me. I meant to ask, how’s your mother doing?’”

The experience hit home for Sewell and forever impacted her outlook. “It showed me no matter how big of a star you are, no matter how successful you are, you’re still a real person and you should always treat people with dignity and respect,” she says. “That’s the way that I’ve always lived my life; I never treated the floor crew any different because I was the anchor and they were running the camera.”

GIVING BACK

As her career as a news anchor grew, Sewell relocated numerous times, but never really put down roots within any given community. “I was always looking for that next opportunity and I knew that it was just going to take me somewhere else, so making strong relationships wasn’t a priority,” she admits.

Once she returned to Arizona, things changed completely. “I realized this was going to be home and I said, ‘You know what? I need to vest in this community!’ Here I [was] every day on the news talking about issues that affect Arizonans … if I don’t see that for myself, how can I genuinely discuss it and be articulate and informed?”

With that, Sewell made a commitment to herself to take on a more active role within her newfound community. “I thought, I owe it to my community that’s given so much back to me to start giving up my time and do what I can in my profession to get the word out about all the good works these non-profits do.”

One of Sewell’s philanthropic passions is the arts; growing up, her family didn’t have much money, but from the time Sewell was about 4, her mother would occasionally splurge on tickets to the theater. “That was a real escape for us,” she recalls, “So the arts have always been important [to me] because I’ve seen the impact they can make on people’s lives. I think it’s important to have interesting cultural activities for kids at all ages.”

But Sewell doesn’t limit herself to art-related causes alone. Rather, she goes where she truly believes she can make an impact. “Pretty much where there’s a strong need, I’m willing to do whatever I can,” she says. “Sometimes I use my media to donate my services or create something for somebody, I can’t just put my name on a committee and do nothing, because what would be the point?”

Sewell’s non-profit work includes sitting on the committee of the Phoenix Heart Ball, an impressive organization devoted to heart-related issues. “I have always been amazed at the commitment of these women involved in the Phoenix Heart Ball,” she says. “It’s been around for 50 years now and they’ve done extraordinary things in terms of their ability to promote awareness of heart disease and raise money. I feel like what they’re doing to get their message out is an example other charities could look at when they’re looking to raise awareness.”

In order to help out as much as she can, Sewell taps into both her media ties and writing skills. “I knew that I could do something … I could use my media and my resources to bring more awareness to heart disease,” she says. “So I started writing stories for magazines … if my story could save one person, then I’ve made a difference.”
"Mentors and role models are a significant part of anybody's life and have really shaped my life personally and professionally."
“What a lot of people don’t realize is heart disease is really the No. 1 killer of women,” she adds. “We don’t necessarily think of heart disease as something we’re going to be afflicted with ... I always thought of men as having heart attacks.”

Sewell also makes sure to include her 4-year-old daughter, Milan, in her charitable works. “I think it’s important for my daughter, who I think is a very fortunate, privileged child, to see that there are other people out there that are not so fortunate,” she says. “She needs to learn compassion and philanthropy, and there’s no better [time] to learn it than at that age.”

**HITTING THE HIGHWAY**

Naturally, with so many balls in the air, Sewell has to be careful not to spread herself too thin. She says that one of her greatest challenges is not always having enough time to spend with her daughter. “I heard a great quote once from Barbara Walters,” Sewell recalls. “They asked her, ‘Do you think women can have it all?’ and she said, ‘Yes—but just not at the same time.’ I never believed that, but now I tend to agree, because something gives. It’s a little hard to give 100 percent all the time to all those things. Sometimes one of those has to take a backseat and try to do my very best to make sure my daughter isn’t that one.”

Luckily, Sewell’s roles with “Arizona Highways” television and Robin Sewell Productions allow her to include her daughter in many of her work-related adventures. “We make it work; I’ve got a great kid. I take her on the road with me,” she says.

Sewell is quick to point out that her TV career has evolved into something vastly different from what it used to be. “As a news anchor and reporter, a lot of the time I was reporting on difficult issues,” she says. “My profession now is just the opposite; I never have to report on bad news anymore. I’m still very much a journalist, but I’m all about doing good news stories, discovering wonderful treasures all over our state and encouraging people to have fun and be proud of this beautiful place where we all live.”

But the show wouldn’t be possible without the help of its generous sponsors. “These sponsors have been with me since the day our show started,” Sewell says. “These are the most philanthropic, giving companies that I’ve ever seen—and I’ve lived in a lot of other states. I’m able to do what I do because of them and that’s a great thing.”

Sewell talks about “Arizona Highways” television with unmistakable pride and exuberance. “This is not just any ordinary TV show,” she says. “Yes, it is an entertaining show—it is about travel, tourism, and enjoying and exploring your state, but this show is more about economic development. It’s about sustainability. It’s about getting out to these communities most people don’t even know exist and telling their stories.”

And the results are often astounding. “We’ve gotten amazing letters from people saying they were about to close their doors, then once we did a story about them their phones started ringing,” Sewell says. “These are mom-and-pop businesses that live and breathe by people walking through their doors.”

**NEW HORIZONS**

In the little downtime she has, Sewell enjoys spending quality time with her daughter, being with friends, going to the theater and exercising. Recently, she’s also been revisiting some of the places featured on her show. “When I’m on ‘Arizona Highways’ [television], I don’t get a chance to really enjoy the places we visit because we’re working, so what I’ve started to do is when I have time off I’ll try to go back to some of these places. I really like to support local, so as much as I can, I patronize the places that we talk about.”

With “Arizona Highways” television gearing up for its seventh season, Sewell and her crew are still looking for ways to improve the show and build Robin Sewell Productions. “Next year, we’re building a big website so we can feature more places in Arizona, give a lot more information and reach a broader audience,” Sewell says. “We’re really excited about building our business in a place like Arizona that’s so open to businesses—women’s in particular.”

She also has a project in the works called Celebrate Arizona. “What we’ve decided is that in these tough economic times, these smaller communities need a voice,” Sewell says. “We’re going to create them and do stories. It’ll be a way to really showcase and help these communities.”

In addition to TV-related endeavors, Sewell plans to do more public speaking in order to help inspire others to follow their dreams. “I want to be able to impart my history and experiences and [tell] people, ‘Don’t let anything stand in front of you. You can do it—you can be and accomplish whatever you want.’”

One thing’s for certain: Robin Sewell is unstoppable. Through talent, determination and hard work, she’s managed to go from budding news reporter to anchor to business owner and television host in a relatively short time. And she’s not done yet.

“It doesn’t matter where you are in life,” she says. “You can choose any career you want and be whoever you want to be.”

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