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Memo: REAL MODELS INC

REAL MODELS INC. AND THE WOMEN WHO STARTED IT ON SOUTH BEACH

TANANARIVE DUE Herald Staff Writer

A page from the annals of ancient South Beach history: It's 1988, and former Virginia Slims **model**-turned- entrepreneur Michele Pommier opens a satellite office of her Coral Gables modeling agency at Miami Beach's Cavalier Hotel.

"We came over here to service the clients better because they all were starting to come in and shoot," she recalls now, from the pristine conference room of her Washington Avenue agency. "We had no sidewalks. We had no palm trees. There were little old ladies walking around. And derelicts."

Fast forward to 1990: Former Paris **model Irene Marie** moves her Fort Lauderdale agency, City **Models**, to Ocean Drive. With dirt-cheap hotel rates available on Miami Beach, she'd been sending her European clients there for lodgings -- and they raved.

"I said, 'I'd better look here and see what's happening.' I brought my husband down and we drove around, and he said, '**Irene**, you must be crazy. You want to move your office to Miami Beach?'" It was a little like digging a well in the desert, the women might say. Now they're looking at a geyser.

"They were the forerunners, the pioneers, the visionaries," says Robert Reboso, film and print coordinator for Miami Beach. Like Art Deco fans before them, both could imagine a special place that just hadn't happened yet. The rest, of course, is more history. South Beach today: A \$37 million modeling industry. New York-based mega-agencies Ford **Models** and Elite both have offices on Miami Beach, among others. More than just a blip on the screen, South Beach is a consistent draw, now touted as the third largest fashion center in the world.

"The **models** in Germany, Italy and Paris want to come to Miami. I don't have to make a trip to do that, so it's very convenient for me," says Shino Okumura, a freelance scout for agencies in Osaka, Japan, and Taipei, Taiwan. She opened her office on Miami Beach a year and a half ago. The payoff for pioneers **Marie** and Pommier have been handsome; both now preside over multimillion dollar powerhouses.

"They're Coke and Pepsi," says Jacqueline McArthur, who owns a smaller South Beach agency. It wasn't easy, the women say. "We went for years being looked at as a regional market," says **Marie**, 42, eating spicy French fries, her favorite, at her agency's Booking Table Cafe on Ocean Drive. A wooden figure of a posing **model** beckons diners from the sidewalk.

"As we became more and more successful, (people thought) it just happened out of the clear blue skies. . . . We were farmers . . . We didn't know what we were doing.

"People must have thought, to a certain degree, I was just a lucky lady," she scoffs in her breathy voice. "Come by here at 10 o'clock at night and see whose light is on. It's mine. When other

people are out having drinks or at a club, I'm up here working. I work like a dog. It's the only way I can get all this accomplished."

Marie has worked at being a good South Beach citizen, too. She's former chair of the Dade Film and Print Advisory Board, and she's encouraged officials to provide tax incentives for the fashion and movie industries.

"Ten years from now, I want to be able to leave it as a legacy for my children. We're an imported industry. We have to bring roots, so it really becomes an industry of South Florida and not one that disappears," **Marie** says.

Nor is South Beach the end of the rainbow for either businesswoman these days. They're branching out, still hustling to keep ahead of the competition.

Marie spends two-week intervals at her new office in Manhattan, struggling to gain respect among the titans in the industry. Why? She got tired of losing her most successful **models** to New York agencies, she says.

"There were many days I said, 'What have I done?' . . . I had established a nice life for myself, and now I'm back on that roller coaster."

And this summer, Pommier, 47, opened a new office in Atlanta. She also recently unveiled a new cosmetics line that is sold at the agency's makeup counter. "I'm working harder than ever before, just to keep the momentum going," says Pommier, whose gentle way belies her power. However stylish her clothes, sneakers are her trademark. She's constantly climbing up and down the stairs of her posh new \$2.5 million headquarters, which opened earlier this year. The interior glistens with mirrors and steel.

Pommier's office is something else again: "My office is the booking table," she says. "I answer the phones. I serve coffee to clients. I do whatever it takes. If I have to book, I book. If I have to talk to clients all day, I do. I love this business. I've been doing this for so long, it's part of me."

The agency's new Atlanta office is smaller, meant to give her experienced **models** a market between here and New York when South Florida's season cools down. Atlanta's season is May through September.

A new office is more work, Pommier says, but not, she admits, like an office in New York would be. "I can't believe that (**Marie**) did that. Atlanta is a nice small market. Controllable. But to do New York -- I said, 'I'm too old.' "

Marie and Pommier are competitive, but not foes, they say. The two share striking similarities. Both are former **models**. Pommier modeled for 10 years, building a national reputation through Virginia Slims ads and Harper's Bazaar covers.

Marie modeled for two years in Europe, much to her parents' chagrin; her father threatened to disown her when she said she wanted to go to Paris. After that, she wrote a syndicated fashion column in the Middle East, then opened **City Models** in partnership with her husband's cousins, whose same-named agency is in Paris.

Both women boast BIG discovery stories, both, coincidentally, in South Florida: Pommier discovered Christy Turlington when she was 13, and **Marie** discovered Niki Taylor at 13. Both women specialize in breaking in young **models**.

Both are mothers. Pommier has a 14-year-old son, David, and a 5-year-old daughter, Jackie. She and her husband, Peter Diel, live off Old Cutler Road. **Marie**, married to entrepreneur Patrick **Marie**, has four children, Stephanie, 3; Alexandre, 10; Caroline, 15; and Nathalie, 17. They live in a secluded Miami waterfront community.

And both are highly protective of their clean images in a business that has a reputation for being anything but.

Pommier says she tries to keep a close eye on her teen **models** so they won't get too caught up in the whirlwind. In spite of their grown-up paychecks -- a top **model** in Miami might make \$400,000 in eight months, a hot new one might earn in \$50,000 -- she cautions them against growing up too fast.

"I don't like them smoking. If they're in bars and under 21, they hear it from me," Pommier says. "They have to finish high school. They have to."

Marie says she tries to make her office friendly to young **models'** families because she remembers her own isolation. It shouldn't be a lonely, bewildering life, she says. "That was one of the main reasons I didn't pursue it. There was no nurturing, and I was scared," says **Marie**. She also has stern warnings for her youngest: "Beware of drugs and parties and things that seem innocent and fun. . . . The problem with kids being in South Beach is a lot of it is concentrated here. There's a lot of opportunity for corruption."

The modeling biz, both Pommier and **Marie** say, is no more hospitable to women with children than any competitive marketplace.

Marie's 15-year-old daughter, Caroline, has already told her mom she's interested in modeling. "Right now, she has to bring her grades up." And Pommier laments the time she spends away from her home. "Saturday and Sunday, I don't care if the president of the United States invited me to dinner, my kids are my number one priority," says Pommier.

One recent Saturday, Donald Trump and Marla Maples hosted a huge modeling season gala at their Palm Beach mansion. It's an annual event, complete with Rolls Royces and paparazzi, a world away from the scene not very long ago. But this year, instead of going, Pommier stayed home.

CARL JUSTE / Herald Staff

A PIONEER: Michele Pommier opened a satellite office of her Coral Gables-based modeling agency in miami beach in 1988.

Illustration:photo: Michele Pommier at her satellite office in Coral Gables-(n)