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THE FACE OF SOUTH FLORIDA

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"Hi, boys," she called to **the** three young hunks sipping beer at a table plunked square on the South Beach sidewalk. "Hi, girl," they sang out in unison.

She never broke stride, her legs languidly taking giant steps over the pavement, her short shiny, blunt-cut blond hair swinging in the breeze. Past the News Cafe she marched, tan suede knapsack bouncing against one shoulder. Past the Colony Hotel's cheerful blue-and-white checked tablecloths, simple black sandals slapping against the ground. Then up the turquoise stairs and first door to the right: **Irene Marie** Model and Talent Agency.

The curious, the envious and lustful may find lots to look at in South Beach these days, hanging around sidewalk cafes watching magazine covers come to life. But among the double-handful of modeling agencies that have planted themselves here in recent years, some scouts are quietly looking elsewhere: fast-food havens, mall movies and high school basketball courts. Somewhere out there could be the next great face.

Like Hollywood in the 1930s and '40s, where stars-to-be like Lana Turner were discovered perched at the counter of Schwab's, Miami Beach has become the land of wannabes. They come flocking in just about the time of year that V-chains of geese are passing over South Carolina. "I look at them like rare birds flying in from all these different countries," says David Shannon, a Miami-based hair and makeup artist who works both sides of the Atlantic. "Their beauty is overwhelming."

"I see a lot of pretty girls coming from Florida," Shannon says, "probably because it's a really healthy environment, like New Zealand or Iceland."

Never mind that the head of one agency's male model division downplays the odds of a girl- or boy-next-door discovery. (It's no longer amateur hour in Miami, he cautions; the competition's strictly big time. Besides, he says, revealing his true motive, if you write about local kids making good, all the wannabes will be storming my doors. Too bad.)

"Miami is an excellent breeding ground as far as finding new talent or bringing it in to develop," says Corinne Nicholas, head of the local branch of Elite, a worldwide modeling agency. "Arthur Elgort just used local talent for German Vogue, so did Helmut Newton for Travel," she adds, citing two internationally famous fashion photographers.

"There's great visibility in Florida," agrees **Irene Marie**, once a model herself and now the head of an agency she moved from Fort Lauderdale to South Beach 2 1/2 years ago.

As for storming agency doors, well, it worked for Niki Taylor of Fort Lauderdale at 13. She and her mother walked into **Irene Marie's** agency and was promptly signed on.

Today, a seasoned 17, Niki has appeared on 43 magazine covers, including Mademoiselle,

Glamour and Elle. She's the youngest model to have made the cover of Vogue, and is reportedly the youngest ever to sign a major cosmetic contract, this one for L'Oreal.

Taylor's mother, Barbara, who along with two modeling agencies, a television agent, a personal consulting firm and a publicity agent is managing the young girl's career, appears to be trying mightily to keep Taylor's life as private as possible amid the windstorm of publicity.

Interviews are few and carefully controlled; money isn't discussed. But for a model, getting a contract with a major cosmetics company is like a seasoned athlete signing a major advertising deal. Five million dollars for three or four years is not unheard of. Supermodel Cindy Crawford (like Taylor, she's got a sexy mole drawing attention to her mouth) is reputedly getting \$1 million a year for her four-year contract with Revlon.

"I've always wanted to be a model," Taylor says. "I love wearing different outfits . . . but I could live in shorts and T-shirts. I'm not a star, I'm just Nick." It's arguable that Taylor, who People magazine cited as one of 1991's 50 most beautiful people in the world, would have vaulted into one of modeling's top spots even if she'd been from South Dakota. But for many young women and men, proximity helps. Whenever an industry moves into your own back yard, it's possible to get a job just hanging out.

"I got discovered," says Nelson Scott, "at this ice cream shop in Coconut Grove. I was just sitting there wearing glasses and a hat, having an ice cream (Hello, Lana?) and this guy came up to me and asked how tall I was. I said 'six feet,' and thought 'Hey, what's wrong with this guy?' I was with a friend, and I was totally embarrassed. "At that time I didn't know Calvin Klein from Kmart, but when he started telling me how much money I could make, I got interested."

Irene Marie says a good model -- not a superstar -- doing runway (modeling a designer's collection at a show) can make \$1,000 to \$2,500 a day. Top models make more. Taylor's minimum, for instance, is \$10,000 a day. Marie estimates that there are perhaps 150 models making more than \$100,000 a year, while quite a lot pull in a comfortable \$30,000 to \$50,000. Commercials are a windfall. Every time a commercial is shown on television the actors receive a "residual" payment. It's not uncommon for a model featured in a single nationwide commercial to pull in \$60,000 to \$100,000, depending on how often the commercial airs.

Scott, a New York native who came to Miami when he was 12, is black and Hispanic. Because the market for nonwhite models is small, it's harder to crack. But Scott's done well. Recently he had a particularly lucky streak and was featured in two Coors Lite commercials filmed in St. Thomas, a television commercial for Southern Bell and another for Bahamas Tourism. It was Al David who scouts and manages male talent for Michelle Pommier, another South Beach Agency, who first spotted Scott eating ice cream and recognized the potential.

It was David, too, who first saw Graham Hooper walking through the Grove. "I gave him a card but never heard from him. A year later I saw him again, this time selling Christmas trees at the fire department. His first job as a model was for Gianni Versace, right after that he did Calvin Klein. He was 16 and pretty lucky. Almost the same thing with Rick Arango. I found him locally in a pizzeria. His face isn't beautiful but his body was outrageous. I thought of him for Calvin Klein's Obsession and his first job turned out to be for Obsession."

Obsession, you will remember, is the ad that put South Beach on the magazine map. In 1984 Bruce Weber took the photographs for the first Obsession campaign on top of the Breakwater Hotel. The combination of Miami's breathtaking light, art deco rooftop and perfect bodies wearing nothing but a suntan got exposure on two continents.

"We've got the models and the most incredible light," says Pommier, a former model who discovered one of the world's current super models in Coral Gables. You may have seen Christy Turlington recently on the cover of the April issue of Elle, or featured in ads for Anne Klein. "A photographer sent Christy to me," Pommier explains. "He was out shooting and saw this 13-year-old on a horse in the sunset. I took one look; here was this classic beauty with baby fat. That

was in 1982. We waited for the baby fat to go away and the bones to come out and Christy's now the highest-paid model in the world."

Still in the beautiful baby fat stage is just-15 Kristin Klosterman, a freshman at Palm Beach County School of the Arts. (Bruce Weber calls her the little shy one, says **Irene Marie**.) Although Klosterman has only been modeling since August, when her sister took her into **Irene Marie's** agency, she's made it all the way to the May cover of Seventeen.

"I wanted to model," says Klosterman, looking, well, just 15 in gym shoes and denim cutoffs. "I thought it would be neat to do it, and then when I came in everybody thought I might be good. I went to New York for a Skidz ad campaign and I loved the attention I got.

"It's fun meeting new people. A lot are really strange, but the stranger they are the better I get along. But not like weird. Now I'm working just enough to go to school, work and then go out with my friends."

Which is just what Klosterman should be doing at this, the start of what could be a great 10-year career. For the average female model doing magazine work, 26 is old, 30 over the hill. In yet another of life's great gender inequities, these are the ages when male models are just hitting their stride.

"This is like an addiction -- a way to make a good living and have all the time off you want," says 31-year-old Britt Bradford. After seven years in the business, he's still ga-ga. "The concept of people paying me money to take pictures in clothes still baffles me." Bradford, who went to Stranahan High in Fort Lauderdale, says he was making \$25,000 a year working for his father at Lauderdale Battery & Electric when a girl he knew said he should try modeling. He went to **Irene Marie**, a visit that changed his life. Now married to another successful model, Karen Wisby (who went to Palmetto High in South Dade), the couple's combined earnings are in the \$250,000 range.

"When I was a kid, I thought I was going to be a professional baseball player," Bradford says. "But here I am with a baby and a wife and the time to look into a lot of different things for the future. I'm the luckiest guy in the world." It's a dream life but somebody's gotta live it. M. Alexandra Nelson writes about South Florida style every Thursday. To reach her, write The Look, c/o Living & Arts, The Miami Herald, 1 Herald Plaza, Miami, Fla. 33132.

Illustration: color photo: Nelson Scott, Niki Taylor; photo: Kristin Klosterman on cover of Seventeen magazine, (MODEL); photo: Niki Taylor, Britt Bradford (MODEL)