

BUSINESS MONDAY



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'She's definitely the modeling industry diva.'

- GERRY KELLY, South Beach nightclub impresario

The grace dame of modeling

Irene Marie is perched somewhat awkwardly on the tiny top rung of a stepladder, trying to strike a pose for a photograph.

Her arms and legs don't seem to fit neatly anywhere as first, but as the camera starts clicking, her limbs shift into seamless motion. She twists at the waist, cocks her head, hikes a shoulder, lowers her chin. "You're really working me!" she says.

She daintily steps off the ladder in her electric blue shoes. "I felt good," she bubbles. "I don't do that very often."

Maybe not. But at 56, Marie's still got the photogenic, flirtatious flair that sparked a stint as a teenage model and a career running one of South Florida's first and premier modeling agencies, Irene Marie Management Group.

Last spring she and her models were featured in the MTV reality show *Job & Ocean*, named for the location of her South Beach agency. She's now pitching a second series to a half-dozen networks in Los Angeles.

She's appeared as a modeling industry spokeswoman on CNN and produced her own video "websites" to stream on YouTube and the agency's MySpace page. For Super Bowl week, she and a bevy of her lithe-boned beauties taped a segment — the "Best Damn South Beach Model Challenge" — for Fox Sports' *Best Damn Sports Show Period*. And the rerun of *Job & Ocean* whirl and abroad is spurring a second whirl of publicity — Marie was interviewed last week by New Zealand radio.

"We try to use every opportunity for exposure," she says.

Marie's grand plan behind the high profile is to become a brand with her name stamped onto products. "It's a bit too soon," she concedes. "I need the second really show."

It's the latest move in a 27-year career where Marie has managed to

ride the vagaries of the beauty business with aplomb. Outlasting many agencies — and spurning many buyout offers along the way — she's won status as an icon of Miami Beach glam and glitz and is known as one of the pioneers who got international buzz going about South Beach back in the '80s.

She's also a mother of five children ("with the same man," she hurries to point out), a believer in reincarnation who's given to dashes of extravagance and big-bubble jewelry, and a shrewd wheeler-and-dealer who loves digging in her garden's rose beds.

"She's quite the grande dame of South Florida," says Ed Arenas, president of Miami Beach-based Unique Casting.

By her own admission, Marie is always looking for "the next thing" in the wax-and-wane modeling business, which last year lured 1,310 still photo shoots — worth nearly \$40 million — to Miami-Dade County after several dozen years.

Back in the early '90s, though, South Beach was the hip spot and agencies like Marie's flourished.

"There was a photo tent on every corner," remembers model Tonya Oliver. "The money was good, and you worked all the time."

An ultra-competitive industry by nature, these days elbows are sharper than ever in modeling. Magazines and marketers find they get more sales trac-

tion from using celebrities to grace their covers and ads rather than models' exquisitely sculpted faces.

The opening of Eastern European countries in the '90s, meanwhile, has flooded the market with women bearing a newly erotic look.

"American models used to run the business in Europe," Marie raves, silencing her rhinestone-encrusted BlackBerry with a stab of a perfectly French-manicured fingernail. "And now the Eastern Europeans come here, too. They've taken a piece of the American model market."

To compensate, Marie has broadened her business over the past five years.

She signs up pro athletes and Latin music stars for sponsorship deals, as well as hairstylists, make-up artists, photographers. She provides image and media consulting services and has even launched a division that focuses on

Starting from scratch 27 years ago, Irene Marie has created one of South Florida's first and premier modeling agencies



PHOTO BY NICK HALLADAY/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

IRENE MARIE

- **Title:** President, Irene Marie Management Group
- **Age:** 56
- **Boon:** Miami Beach
- **Career:** Fashion model; founded Irene Marie Model Management, 1979
- **Personal:** Married to Patrick Marie, five children
- **Hobbies:** Gardening, fashion

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RUNNING THE SHOW: Modeling guru Irene Marie, far left, watches Tyler Ocampo master an obstacle course for a modeling segment on Fox Sports' *Best Damn Sports Show Period*. At right, hairstylist Stacy Gardner models for the show. From left are Raven Davis, Brittany Ann and Lise Stefan.

Mixing modeling, mysticism and motherhood

*MARIE, FROM 22

publishing authorized pictorial biographies of the rich and famous.

Her bread and butter, though, remains booking models, from babies to baby boomers, for everything from catalogs to runway shows. Her agency takes the standard 20 percent commission. After 8th & Ocean aired, the agency was inundated with thousands of portfolios, forcing Marie to hire an extra person to wade through the photos and charge a \$4.99 online submission fee.

Marie's most famous find to date was Pembroke Pines supermodel Niki Taylor, whose mother started sending the agency pictures of her 12-year-old, still in braces. When the girl was 13, Marie brought her in. Fort Lauderdale photographer Scott Teitler remembers Marie telling him, "I just discovered the baby Cindy Crawford."

"She was beautiful," Marie



COURTESY OF IRENE MARIE

TEAMWORK: Running a business and maintaining a family have been challenging, says Irene Marie. Pictured with her are husband Patrick and their two youngest daughters, Antoinette, front, and Stephanie.

recalls, sitting in her white, minimalist-style office. Vases of rose blooms she grows in her garden splash the room with color.

HUGE OPERATION

Marie's multimillion-dollar

agency, which employs 18, represents roughly 1,500 faces around the world — about 850 are full-time models — and some 1,800 clients, ranging from magazines to advertising agencies. She started with none.

MIAMI MODELING

Modeling is big business in Miami, both in terms of the number of shoots and in expenditures.

Year	No. of shoots	Expenditures
2008	1,247	\$26.7 million
2007	879	\$25.4 million
2006	830	\$28.7 million
2005	829	\$20.4 million
2004	867	\$25.7 million
2003	1,030	\$16.7 million
2002	1,029	\$19.5 million

SOURCE: Miami-Dade Mayor's Office on Film & Entertainment

Marie's story begins, fittingly enough, in Paris at age 19. Born in Miami Beach, she moved to Europe with her mother and step dad, a Pan Am pilot, when she was 10. Even back then, fashion was a magnet. "Ever since I was a little girl, I loved clothes," she recalls.

Standing five-foot eight and a half, she was often

urged to try modeling. So she did, much to her parents' chagrin. It was a short-lived career in which she was alone and adrift. She returned to Florida, and met and married French entrepreneur Patrick Marie.

HOMMY DUTY

By her late 20s, she had two daughters and had had enough of wiping drool-drenched chins: "I was bored to tears."

A cousin of her husband's who owned a modeling agency in Paris visited South Florida, loved it as a photo-shoot location and suggested that Marie open an agency. After a month in Paris learning the business side, Marie opened her agency in Fort Lauderdale in 1979.

"I became passionate about it," she says. "I discovered it wasn't the business I didn't like in Paris, it was the environment. There was no phi-

*TURN TO MARIE, 25

Irene Marie runs multimillion dollar agency

WENDY WATSON

teager of guidance for the girls.

Marie amassed a stable of photo-friendly teens, screaming young women wherever she happened to be. Their eye is remaining the same for all.

"I can see this is a modeling gig, this is a high-fashion gig," she says. "I started discovering a lot of good girls in Public, Toys 'R Us, wherever I was. I was looking."

In 1990, Marie moved the agency to South Beach at a time when there was little crowd. "I was a real underdog," she says. She and her husband bought the Ocean Drive building where her office is still located for \$200,000. It's now worth several million.

MODE THAN MODELING

Marie made much of her reputation with teen models, whom she mothered as well as managed. "There's juggling being kids with this adult world," she says. "The biggest myth is that this is glamorous. They find out it's hard work."

Models who have worked with her say her show was always open to giving advice about everything as well as career moves. It makes a point to attend model's weddings, baby showers and the like.

"She's always been very accessible, very loving and willing to give you model feedback," says her husband, Bob, who has worked with Marie the two decades. "It was alone when I first came to Florida. Irene was like an older sister to me."

As much as her models know her as a mother hen, her business associates know her as a boss.

"She's involved but she's an amazing technician," says Jerome, the casting director. "She knows how to work a deal on everyone else."

Photographer Taylor remembers his first dealings with her years ago when she asked him to change eye-liner on models casually. He agreed but soon found he wasn't getting enough work and needed to sign with other agencies.

"I went to her and said 'This isn't really paying me like,'" he recalls. "She told



She makes them look great

LEADING AN ENVOIE: Irene Marie's agency represents roughly 1,500 faces around the world - about 850 are full-time models - and some 1,800 clients, ranging from magazines to advertising agencies. She started with none.

me 'Get a job as a waiter' — and I did! I was sucked in by that charisma and presence of her. Irene has always had a way of making other people want what she wants."

SUNNY AIR

Marie works pain, illness, stress, but also a special quality that seems at odds with her business of peddling that most shallow of commodities — beauty.

"Beauty is just a gift that you're born with," she tells her 20-year-old grandson with a laugh. "That's the structure you needed for your journey in life. Our most important reason for living is to bring our childhoods." ■

She laughs and opens a flat to display a blue star tattoo. The tattoo lies on a silver box on her desk and contrasts a blue cardboard star with the star of the business. God loves you, printed on it.

"Well, I'll tell you," she says.

"The blue star is a symbol of Mary of the Rosary, an early Christian who defied traditional female roles to preach the Gospel of Christ in southern France. Marie is writing a book on the woman's life and

"She's always been very accessible, very loving and willing to give.

— BOB BOYCE, a model who has worked with Marie for two decades

books on the cardboard stars to postcard-size and passivity as a reminder of God's love. "I took on her mission," she says. "I felt compelled to do it."

It's just one manifestation of Marie's faith for the theoretical.

Barbara D'Elvina, who leads Prima Coring in Miami, recalls the time when Marie asked her when in the United States she'd like to go to dinner that night. "When Barbara D'Elvina answered enthusiastically.

At 7 p.m., a limo picked her up and whisked her to a waiting private jet. Destination: the Big Easy. "We went to a fabulous restaurant and walked around the French Quarter," D'Elvina says. "She invited me to Fun Land, a fair around 3 a.m. It was beyond imagination, but that's her."

Longtime agency model Kasey Langston remembers Marie pulling up to the office in a Rolls-Royce. As the guard, Marie tossed her the

keys, telling her "go for a spin."

Marie smiles when she finally reminded of the incident. "It's just a car," she says.

BALANCING ACT

As her agency followed in air and water, so did Marie's family. She has four daughters and a son, ranging from an 11-year-old sixth-grader to a 28-year-old physician.

She readily admits that she can't. "I've been managed for years without two full-time assistants and an accommodating husband.

"There are times I think I can't take another day," she says. "I've thought about getting up the business. I've thought about giving up workbooks. I've had times with my kids. I've had challenges with my husband."

How does she cope? "I pray every day. That's how I make it."

Praying married women say it times in the mid '90s.

Marie opened an agency in New York and was successful half her time there. At the same time, her traditional Catholic beliefs clashed by her husband's unorthodox and a broader concept of spirituality embracing reincarnation and many other religious ideas.

Reliving her marriage was tearing and leading New York competitors ruthless. Marie closed the Big Apple agency and returned full-time to Miami to reconcile with her husband. "He liked me the way I was," Marie says. "It took a long time to work through it."

The couple, who live in Miami's Bay Point estate in an old house dated with globe-trotting totemism, have been married 16 years. Patrick, described by those who know him as funny, unrestrained and "very French," is retired. "I can't imagine me being without the kids," says model Langston.

IN CHARGE

Marie is in her Mother Superior role — getting the models ready for a taping, handling set logistics, advising agents to parties don't show, according to who had hair and makeup done.

She's also fighting to pay for a trip to Amsterdam, where she visited her son and met his new girlfriend.

In a business where teenagers are the prime, she admits that aging has been difficult sometimes. "I think I'm wonderful," she says. "It's not me, it's me. Why not do it for emotionally and mentally. I'm comfortable with my age. You can't pay me to be again."

Marie shows no signs of slowing. She's constantly got new projects in the hopper — next up, a model recruiting initiative on the Internet. Details to come in May.

She would also like to get more publicly involved in the various social and economic issues the modeling industry, which she has seen firsthand several times.

"She's definitely the modeling industry diva," says South Beach nightclub impresario Gerry Rice. "Agencies come and go, but Irene is at the top of her game."

PHOTOGRAPH BY BOB BOYCE FOR ENR; STYLING: JENNIFER WATSON