

# MIAMI ICONS





# IRENE MARIE

**F**rom her third-story perch above Ocean Drive, model maven Irene Marie has a panoramic view of the sand, sun and sea. There are also glimpses of gorgeous Brazilians playing volleyball and hard-bodied hunks frolicking on the beach. For Irene, this pulchritudinous landscape is par for the course. Not only has she been headquartered at 728 Ocean Drive (a.k.a. the infamous building from the Al Pacino movie *Scarface*) since 1989, but beautiful people are also her specialty. As the owner of her eponymous modeling agency for 25 years, Marie has worked with and discovered some of the biggest names in the business, including Niki Taylor, Bar Rafaeli, Cindy Taylor and Kimora Lee. But more than the big names, Marie is known for longevity in a competitive field. Year after year, her models steadily book catalogues, print ads and television work. "If I look back 25 years, 15 years, 10 years, it has always been a different stage of development and transition," she notes. "The agency is doing well because it's still here. That is an accomplishment on its own."

Of course, Irene Marie, the agency, received a bump in recognition with its own MTV reality show called *8th & Ocean*. The first—and so far only—season aired from March to May of 2006 and was an instant hit. The program also anointed Marie, 57, as the undisputed queen of Miami's modeling scene. Additionally, it taught viewers that modeling is not always glamorous. "You can reach anywhere you want in your life if you are prepared to work hard for it," Irene declares. "My experience is that you have to be patient. Have passion and integrity. That follows you everywhere. It really is the demonstration of who you are. The basic principles of morality are very important to me."

Irene was herself discovered in 1969 in Beirut, Lebanon. A Miami Beach native (she was born at the now defunct St. Francis Hospital), Marie moved to Europe and then Lebanon in her early teens with her mother and stepfather, a pilot for Pan Am. "Beirut was a very international city back then," she recalls. "The president was Christian. Beside Israel, it was the only non-Muslim country in the Middle East. Not that there weren't Muslims, but

there were Jews and Christians there, too. The second language was French because Lebanon had been a French mandate for many years." At 19, she was approached to co-host a TV show in Beirut. "The show was in French," Marie continues. "Although my mother was French, she never taught us the language. My mom would help me learn the questions before the show. I memorized then. I couldn't ad-lib so I made some silly mistakes. I remember Charles Aznavour was on the show once. He is a very famous French singer. I had memorized the questions to ask him, but I used the wrong tense. In French, you have female and male tenses. Well, I used the female tense."

After that, Irene moved to Paris for one year to pursue a modeling career. "My family didn't want me to go to Paris and be a model," says Marie, whose maiden name is Saba. "That was my rebellious moment. Once I felt that I had done it, I didn't enjoy it so much." A trip to Miami in 1973 to visit her father resulted in a more fortuitous meeting with Patrick Marie, her future husband. They were married in Miami in 1974, and Irene settled into motherhood with the arrival of her first two children. "My life had shifted a lot from Europe," she says. "Not that I was bored, but I didn't feel fulfilled. I had grown up in Europe and had an interesting life. Now I was in Miami in the '70s. It was a big change." Modeling was put on the back burner while Patrick, a restaurateur, worked.

That was until Patrick's cousin, Louise Despointes, who started the famous Paris modeling agency City Models, persuaded Irene to return to the industry—as an agent. Despointes saw that South Florida was a developing market with only a handful of regional agencies. So, after Irene trained in Paris for a month, the Southern branch of City Models debuted in late 1979 in Fort Lauderdale. "We developed the concept of bringing Europeans to South Florida," Marie comments. "We were the first fashion agency here. All of the locals thought I was crazy and that I would never make it." Not only was City Models successful, but Irene also envisioned an even bigger need for personal management of models on the horizon. In the summer of 1983, she founded Irene Marie in Fort Lauderdale. "My lawyer recommended using my name,"

she admits. "I was shy about it in the beginning."

The agency took off immediately. "My first cover was for *Elle* magazine," Marie remembers. "It was a 13-year-old girl whom I had discovered at Lionel Playworld. Her name was Kim Harbour. The first job she did was the cover of *Elle* magazine and it was shot here." But this was nothing compared to her next discovery, Niki Taylor. "Niki's mom, Barbara, had been sending me pictures of her since she was 11," Irene says. "She wore braces. I said, 'When the braces come off, send more pictures.' Finally, she sent in a picture without braces. I told her to bring this girl in right away. I remember walking through the reception of our Fort Lauderdale office and Barbara and Niki were sitting on the couch. I stopped and looked at Niki for a while. Then I told our new-faces booking agent, 'You really need to sign this girl. She's absolutely beautiful.' She was 13 and was with me for five years. She became a great friend, as did her mom."

Irene was blown away by Niki's beauty, poise and professionalism—even at age 13. "I remember one of her first jobs," says Marie. "She was shooting off Fifth Street. You don't see models perform the way Niki did too often. It's just an incredible talent. It's like a singer: You have good singers and extraordinary singers. Niki was extraordinary in front of the camera. I thought God had birthed her like that. But I found out later that Barbara had been training her since she was 11—in a good way, though, by looking at magazines and taking her pictures. It was baby steps, but it gave her knowledge of what to do in front of the camera. Her family was very involved, but it was certainly a great team effort. I was fundamental in developing her career."

While Niki was taking off, so, too, was South Beach. "I had that South Beach bite in the mid '80s," Irene says. "I was booking my clients into hotels in Boca Raton and Fort Lauderdale. But they started asking for hotels in South Beach. I said, 'Really, why would you want to be in South Beach?' I knew South Beach from when my father was alive. My brothers and I would meet my father every Saturday night at the dog track at the end of Ocean Drive. South Beach was not a desirable place to be. So it was not registering to me why these clients liked this area. Then they told me



Irene Marie with one of her most celebrated discoveries, model Niki Taylor, circa 1990, right before Taylor vaulted into supermodel status.



Anna Nicole Smith for Guess.



Arthur K for Tommy Hilfiger.



The most appealing new looks for fall  
Nancy Donahue for Vogue.  
age dressing - looking younger, healthier, tennis!



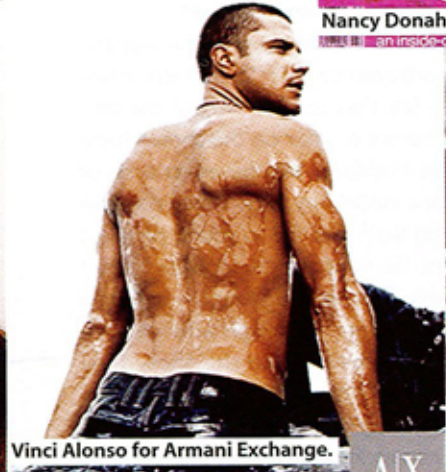
"LE MALE"  
Jean Paul Gaultier  
David Fumero for Jean Paul Gaultier.



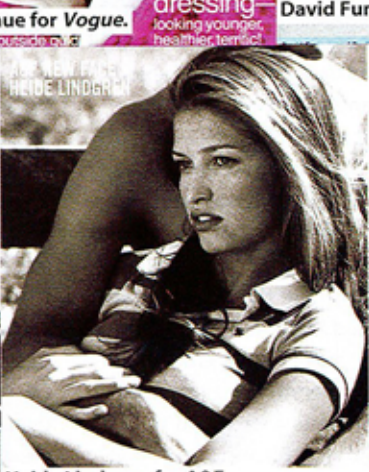
Cindy Taylor for Guess.



Bar Rafaeli



Vinci Alonso for Armani Exchange.



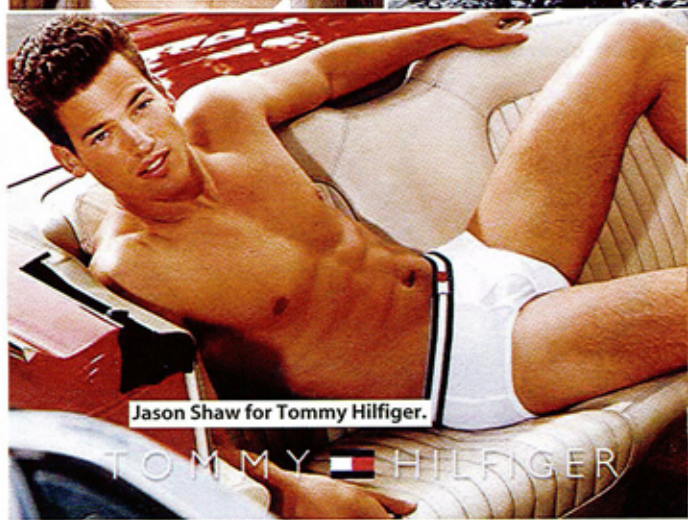
Heide Lindgren for A&F.



Brett Novek



Britt Bradford for Versace.



Jason Shaw for Tommy Hilfiger.



Derrick Hayes for Guess.

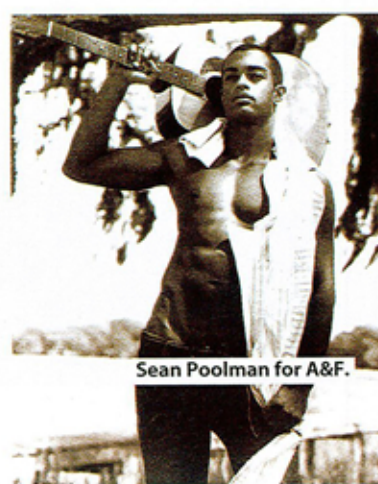


Brandi Quinones

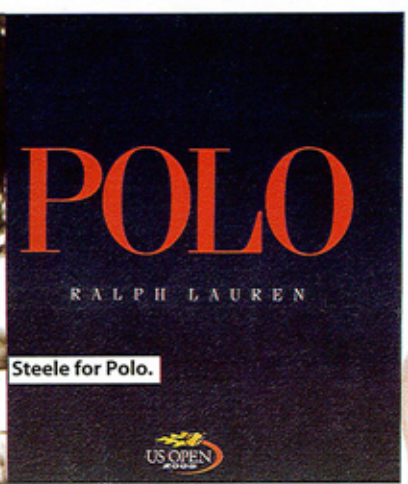


Niki Taylor for Seventeen.

"We were the first fashion agency here. All the locals thought I was crazy and that I would never make it."



Sean Poolman for A&F.



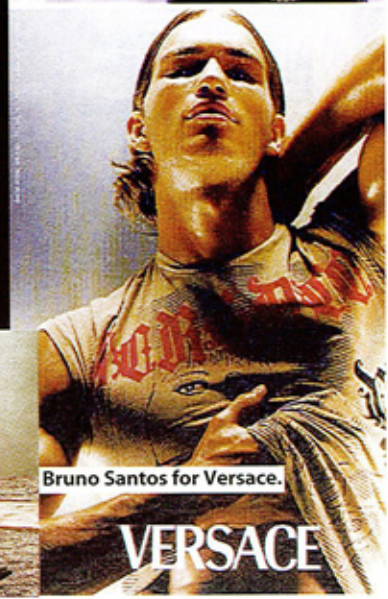
Steele for Polo.



Ethan Spears for Calvin Klein.



Aaron Pope for Sean John.



Bruno Santos for Versace.

## IRENE MARIE

the light in the morning was fantastic. I started looking at it with a different eye. Eventually, I understood." In 1988, the same year she signed Niki, Irene bought the building at 728 Ocean Drive with her husband. She moved in a year later after renovating the property.

Of course, it's renowned as the setting for one of the grisliest scenes in cinema history, the infamous chain-saw murder in *Scarface*. "You're not going to believe this: I did not watch *Scarface* until three months ago," she admits. "I don't do well with violence. I started to watch it once or twice and it was so violent I got up and left. But there's a whole cult about this building. The father of one of my models is a *Scarface* fan. He said, 'Irene, you should line people up and make this into a museum.' And I said, 'I never saw the movie.' The next day, I had a DVD delivered to me."

While the *Scarface* building proved to be a lucky charm for Irene over the next few years, she lost her number-one star, Taylor, to Spectrum Models in New York in 1993. "I always discovered talent," Irene

says. "There are maybe one or two Niki Taylors in your career, but I had a good eye. I said to myself, How many times am I going to do this for New York? I should be funneling talent for my own company, not for others." Subsequently, Marie opened a New York office of her agency, which lasted eight years. "It was the biggest learning experience of my life," she acknowledges. "It was challenging and exhilarating. Eventually, I closed it because it was too much. I had two more children during that period. I was on an airplane every two weeks."

Irene's next adventure was even bigger, filming MTV's reality show *8th & Ocean* in the winter of 2006. "That was an experience," she says. "The way reality works is that it wasn't staged, but in order to get camera crews to where things were happening there had to be a collaboration between me, my staff and the producers. I needed to know everything: if somebody was late, if there was a problem with a model, if a client was bitching and complaining. Whatever it was, everybody had to hold until we could get the camera

crews there. It was real things, really happening, but we had to coordinate it. Let's say a model got kicked off a job for whatever reason. Normally the booker would be on the phone with that guy then and there. Here, we had to call him into the agency and then call the producers. They would rush and get a camera crew here and that's how it happened. It was a very hectic time but it was awesome."

So, was she happy with the way she was portrayed on TV? "There were a few times I felt they could have put the sentence before or after on the show," Irene answers truthfully. "Whenever I criticize or mentor a model, I try to do it with compassion. I'm very sensitive to young people. I just am. I'm holding a huge place in their life. Even if I have to be tough—and I'm a pushover—I am not tough without compassion. Sometimes in the show they would just get that critical moment rather than anything that went around it. It gave me a certain image. Overall, though, MTV was fair. The show branded my name. I had already been in business for 20something

Early stints as a talk-show host in Lebanon and as a model in Paris prepared Irene Marie for the spotlight of both managing and discovering some of the hottest names in the business.

*"I always discovered talent. There are maybe one or two Niki Taylors in your career, but I had a good eye."*



years, but that one season on TV gave me more brand value than all my years. Millions of people watched it. You'd see my building 15 times in every episode. It was always about Irene Marie, Irene Marie."

While a second season never happened (Irene speculates that the show got lost in the shuffle of executive turnover in New York and Los Angeles), *8th & Ocean* continues to air all over the world, most recently in France. Marie still represents several cast members, including Brit, Adrian, Talesha, Sean, Teddy and Vinci. And this summer, she expects to be bustling with catalogues, print ads and the Mercedes-Benz Swim shows. The good news is that with the weak dollar and strong euro, suddenly Miami is back in vogue. "We are a location destination," she notes. "The euro is expensive to the Europeans, too. They are getting it 40-percent cheaper by coming to Miami. We are quite a deal. This season we were up 20 percent in foreign clients."

Not everything is flourishing in the modeling industry, though. "The nature of the fashion business has shifted," Irene describes. "The upper level of the business is now celebrity-driven. We've lost that. Even in the beauty campaigns they are using celebrities."

Therefore, Marie is trimming her modeling roster down from 900 to 400. This change will allow her to manage her clients more closely, as opposed to just being a booking agency. "I'm retaining the best in each division, and maybe a dozen of those we are speculating on," Irene says. "I'm a pretty-person company. I always have been. I'm known for having beautiful people, no matter which division they're in."

This year, however, Irene is actively molding new talent. "We found about a dozen girls, from 11 to 17 years old," she notes. "I personally trained them and taught them how to be a model, how to dress for castings, how to do their runway walk and how to deal with clients. Normally models learn this along the way. I've never given lessons before. But I have hope for some of these young girls. My clients are happy to see me developing talent. I made my name on that. Not a lot of agencies do this. They just get talent.



***"The nature of the fashion business has shifted. The upper level of the business is now celebrity-driven."***

But this is raw talent." One of the aspiring mannequins happens to be her daughter Stephanie.

As a mother of five, ranging in age from 30 to 12, Irene has encouraged all her children's dreams. (Another daughter, Caroline, worked as an agent for Irene before switching over to manage photographer Greg Lotus.) "I tried really hard to be at the major events in their lives," Marie explains. "There are moms who don't work who were probably at every ballet recital. I wasn't at every one, no, but I definitely had a presence. I started this business like a hobby. It wasn't a goal or ambition I had. But I never had the goal to have five children, either. I flow with life. I'm aware of opportunities when they come and whether to take them or not. I'm a Leo, so I am a strong woman. I am very determined. I don't like to give up."

Irene is also quite charitable and is a founding mentor for Jennifer Valoppi's organization, Women of Tomorrow. Spiritually she is also very giving, and often hands out stars to encourage people to be their best. In fact, a star is tattooed on



the palm of her left hand. "This tattoo honors a woman called Mary of the Heavens," Marie says. "She lived 2,000 years ago and had a tattoo on her hand of a star. She was one of the first ministers of Jesus' testimony in Europe. She gave her life for that. She was a martyr. I learned about her when I took a trip to France with a few of my friends. I was very moved by her story." As far as what the future holds, Irene is not scared to throw around the "R" word. "I've been thinking of retiring for ten years," she says with a smile. "But I'm a day-to-day person. We don't know what tomorrow will bring." 📷

**Clockwise from top left: with Ed Razek, senior creative officer for Victoria's Secret; with the models of the MTV reality show *8th & Ocean*; the Irene Marie building in the 1980s; with her husband, Patrick Marie, and their five children; with musician Pitbull at a Florida Marlins game.**