

# MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE



*Beyond the camera, news anchor **Vickie Newton** shines as a community advocate*

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When super-model Cindy Crawford celebrated her 40th birthday this year, she told the media that a bad hair day can still make her spirits plunge. Songbird and dancer Janet Jackson

also turned 40 in 2006. Though the slinkiness of her gown and the length of the red carpet she may have traversed that day went largely unmentioned, the number 40 probably had extra resonance. It's the number of pounds she reportedly gained before committing to a regimen of jogging, grueling lunges and power walking.

Emmy Award-winning KMOV-TV anchor Vickie Newton celebrated her 40th birthday this year, too, but in a different way. In the world of TV news, where men get furrowed and women seem to get younger with each passing year, many personalities never draw attention to their age — much less print it on 500 invitations and reiterate it in the price to attend their fund-raising birthday party.

But last spring, on an invitation stylishly enhanced with tones of pink and brown and gray, Newton requested that guests join her in raising money to benefit the Literacy Roundtable while celebrating her 40th birthday. The exclamation point was included. So was the completely tax-deductible price of \$40 per person, the venue of the Ritz-Carlton St. Louis and an explanation. The Literacy Roundtable is a consortium of literacy service providers from the bi-state area.

Every year, the invitation said, more than 6,000 metropolitan-area residents complete the coursework for a GED, or the General Educational Development test, that serves as a high school equivalency degree. But sadly, since not all students can afford the \$40 cost of the final exam, many neglect their dreams.

Newton's party raised \$11,000, enough to quadruple the amount in the Vickie Newton Literacy Fund, established in her honor two years ago. Because most of the fund's recipients require just \$20 to \$40, the sum also is enough to pay for years of grants.

At Newton's birthday party, some 125 guests mingled amid trays of hors d'oeuvres (donated by the Ritz) and an open vodka

and martini bar (courtesy of Luxco spirits).

They also bid on Chi Chi Cosmetics, toys and baskets of other donated goods at a silent auction. Newton's new friend, Chris Frank, helmed the underwriting efforts. The president of CFX Inc., a St. Louis-based ad, design and communications firm, met Newton in an elevator just months earlier, on the way to their photo shoot for the *St. Louis Business Journal's* 2006 "Class of 40 Under 40," a list of young professionals making their mark in town. The two now brainstorm by phone at least once a day and are trying to schedule a regular monthly lunch.

Newton's actual birth date is April 7. For her April 21 party at the Ritz, she wore a powder-blue Ralph Lauren suit, the same suit she chose for her *St. Louis Woman Magazine* cover shot. She bought this "big-girl suit," as she calls it, not because it makes her look elegant or trim, which it does, but because "it makes me feel peaceful," she says.

#### A plea for serenity

The KMOV newsroom sits practically within shouting distance of St. Louis' signature Gateway Arch. Not long ago in the newsroom, Newton cornered anchor/reporter Robin Smith. Newton was exhausted. She'd overbooked her free time. In the TV business, where the celebrity status of anchors and reporters can keep them in constant demand as headliners or ribbon cutters or dirt diggers

or panelists at public events, overcommitting is a common hazard.

Ever since joining the KMOV team in 2002, Newton often has turned to Smith for sisterly advice. A native St. Louisan, Smith has been on TV here for 33 years. Like Newton, she places a high value on community involvement.

Newton, who grew up in tiny Bearden, Ark., and worked previously in Little Rock, Kansas City, Detroit and Atlanta, where she was an anchor briefly for CNN Headline News, has spent 20 years on TV, counting her experience in college.

"How do I stay focused and centered?" Newton wanted to know. Despite the normal nine-hour workdays in TV newsrooms, in Newton's case from 2 p.m. to 11 p.m. on weekdays, on-air personalities are frequently encouraged to positively influence the cities where they live. Such extracurricular participation is favored though not mandated.

Allan Cohen, general manager of KMOV-TV, a CBS affiliate, sets an example. He and his wife, Roberta, moved here 26 years ago. Both New Yorkers, they expected to lose interest in St. Louis within two years. Instead, intrigued by the community and its potential, they stayed and continue to give ideas, time and manpower to charitable endeavors. To Cohen, Vickie Newton is more than an employee.

"She's my friend. I just love her," he says.



Newton and co-anchor Larry Conners share a great professional relationship.

"I not only enjoy having her on our air, but I treasure the time we spend together. She cares so much about this community and making a difference. It's beautiful. She's everywhere."

When Newton cornered her, Smith gave in-the-trenches advice. "You can't let your profession take away your core being. Be true to yourself," she said. For starters, she told Newton to put away her curling iron on weekends, the same curling iron that gives her such an expertly straightened coiffure that *Riverfront Times* readers once voted her Best Female Hair on local TV.

Now on Saturdays and Sundays, Newton lets her natural curls show and, when they need to, frizz. The result, which heightens her sense of privacy and of not working, is that she's no longer as instantly recognizable. Even loyal viewers of KMOV-TV — whose 10 p.m. newscast has surpassed KSDK-TV's to become No. 1 in the metropolitan area, as well as the No. 2 highest-rated late-night newscast in the country — often walk right past her. Not until they hear her well-modulated tones, do they realize it's Newton.

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Smith also offered this advice: "Be centered. Be at peace with the universe, calm, easily able to fall asleep and wake up, with nothing on your mind." To Smith, being centered also can mean feeling loved and feeling that you're giving love.

#### Mother knows best

Love, romantic and enduring, may be one of the few things Newton hasn't found. She moved here from Atlanta, where her assignments included filming a documentary in South Africa. What St. Louis offered was the predictability of an anchor's schedule, which meant the chance for more personal life. Equally important, St. Louis put Newton geographically closer to her family.

Her favorite aunt and uncle, Elaine and Ronald Gordon, live here. Newton and her aunt now talk by phone three or four times a week. Newton's cousins, and sisters Cristal Gordon Brown and Michelle Gordon Bland, also are St. Louis residents.

Vickie's brother, 35-year-old Nick (Nikki),



Clockwise: Newton; her mother, Pearlie; sister-in-law's mother, Phyllis Graham; brother, Nick; sister-in-law, Kim; and father, Grover. Niece, Piper (above).

is a senior vice president at an investment firm in Overland Park, Kan. He lives in Leawood, Kan., with his wife, Kim, and their baby, 11-month-old Piper.

With a little coaxing, Newton will reach into the picnic-basket-sized straw purse she bought on sale at Nine West and fumble for her black leather billfold. Blissfully, she retrieves pictures of her niece as a she-must-be-smiling newborn, of Piper's feet in Nikki's

hand, of Piper's hand in Nikki's hand.

"Oh, she's such a sweetie," Newton coos. She has more photos in her car and in her office.

Vickie and Nikki grew up in the southern Arkansas town of Bearden, population about 1,200. Their parents, Grover and Pearlie Newton, met in grade school, took a shine to each other as seventh-graders and graduated together from Bearden High School, then an all-black school.

Grover retired as a master sergeant after 27 years with the U.S. Army. Pearlie, who was her daughter's English teacher at the integrated Bearden High, became a guidance counselor at the school and still works there part time, helping implement the government's No Child Left Behind policy.

By age 7, Vickie set her career goals. Observing a young woman deliver the news one day on TV, she announced that she, too, wanted to do TV news. "It really blew my mind," Pearlie confides. "I didn't have a clue about how to get on TV. I simply said, 'You

must learn to listen to the news and learn to pronounce words.'"

Since the Newtons already watched the news as a family, Pearlie focused on the words. At every opportunity, she had Vickie reading aloud and enunciating.

Vickie had a head start. "She wasn't any more than 3 when she was given four or five lines to learn and recite for Easter and Christmas programs at church," Pearlie

recalls. "I would say, 'OK, let me hear your speech. Have you learned it?' We'd work on it. I'd say, 'OK, stand up straight. Look at me. Recite your speech for me.'" Memorization wasn't enough. Vickie had to speak with meaning and clarity. The same held true for school. When the Newton kids were small, their homework wasn't complete until they'd read it aloud for Pearlie.

Punctuation received maximal attention, as did anything written by etiquette expert Emily Post. "Emily Post was a regular household name. She was like a family member," Pearlie says, chuckling. Vickie still feels guilty if she doesn't immediately hand write thank-you notes.

Young Vickie also filled her days with dance lessons and, beginning at age 7, piano lessons. Pearlie and her best friend, who was the music teacher at a neighboring school and the church pianist, decided that Vickie would receive the most solid foundation in classical music by taking private classes with the high school music teacher.



KMOV is a home away from home for Newton.

It fell to the best friend to teach Vickie the extra stuff, the colorful keynotes and musical phrasing. Vickie, who sang in the church choir and tried to complete her mother's personally assigned summer reading lists, soon became the substitute pianist at church. In addition, she played piano there every second and fourth Sunday.

That was before she got the weekend slot at the country music radio station. When Vickie turned 16, her dad told her to get a summer job. Like the other kids, she wanted to work at McDonald's, but remembering her goal, she put herself as close to TV news gathering as possible. In nearby Camden, she applied for a part-time job at a country-western radio station.

Pearlie thinks it's the pronunciation that got her hired. "At that time, Gorbachev and Khrushchev and big names were being batted around, and she could pronounce them all," Pearlie remembers.

scholarship to Arkansas State University in Jonesboro. While fast-tracking her way through in three years, she worked for a radio station and then the local TV station. "She had been preparing," Pearlie says. "We didn't know what for."

#### What 40 means

Newton sits peacefully at a white-clothed table along the perimeter of the Ritz-Carlton's restaurant, the same room where she celebrated her birthday. Dressed in a tomato-red sleeveless top and matching tailored trousers, purchased on sale — the only way she buys — she's like punctuation against the room's muted décor.

Too calm at this moment to be an exclamation point, Newton pauses, looking up from a small book titled *God's Promises and Answers for Women*. The book was a gift from her mother, whom she talks to almost daily via phone and e-mail.

him? He's a great friend."

Newton reaches for her cell phone. It's another friend, fellow Opera Theatre board member Susan Gelman. She wants Newton to play the piano at a fund-raiser next spring. A concert pianist, Newton continues to take lessons. She bought herself an ebony grand piano for her 30th birthday. She'll likely say "yes" to Gelman.

Reflecting on so publicly turning 40, with coverage of her party on KMOV's newscast that same evening, Newton says, "It was more therapeutic than anything. I had been practicing for about a year, saying 'I'm going to be 40.' I refused to succumb to denial."

When she was younger, she had life all mapped out. She'd marry in her 20s, have children and ascend the ranks as a successful TV anchor. Though Newton doesn't often talk about it, she did marry her college boyfriend when both were 24. For her career, they moved from Little Rock, Ark., to

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The Camden station had both AM and FM components. Ironically, on Sundays it was Vickie's responsibility to listen to St. Louis Cardinals baseball games out of the headphone on one ear, country music out of the other, and then insert commercials at appropriate intervals and remembering periodically to talk.

Pearlie listened. After each resumption of radio programming, Vickie would telephone home. How did she sound? "Well, do this. Raise your voice. Do that," Pearlie would say. About a year into the job, which she kept from 10th through 12th grade, Vickie felt confident enough to stop telephoning.

At Bearden High, where she was elected president of the student body, Vickie graduated with a 4.0 grade point average, sharing valedictorian honors in a senior class of 35 pupils with Latitia Strange, her good friend and frequent piano duet partner. In those days, Vickie had a steady boyfriend. A year or two her senior, he graduated from the high school in the next town over and attended the U.S. Naval Academy.

As a payoff for her hard work in and out of school, Vickie won a radio broadcasting

If this morning was like any other, Newton was up at 7 a.m., ate breakfast consisting of fresh, sliced peaches and cottage cheese, and possibly walked three to five miles, as she does a couple of times a week. Then she listened to an online meditation, either by Dr. Charles Stanley or Charles Swindoll, and read her Bible.

Talking about her life, Newton says, "It's imperative in this busy, hectic world that there's balance. If you can't balance the world, and obviously we can't, then I think it's good to strive for balance in your own world. And then maybe in time, you contribute a little bit of your peace to someone else's world."

And busy Newton's world is. Earlier today, her scheduled window washer arrived at her Central West End condo. Moreover, she needs to listen to a whole box of CDs from orchestras and musicians prior to leaving for Washington, D.C. There, for the first time, she's serving on the music panel for the National Endowment for the Arts, helping determine which musical artists are most worthy of grants. "Isn't that cool?" she says. "Charles MacKay at Opera Theatre of St. Louis recommended me. Wasn't that nice of

Kansas City to Detroit. In Detroit, her husband earned his MBA and went to law school. Afterward, she got a master's in journalism from the University of Detroit.

"I think the marriage simply collapsed under the weight of our growing careers," she says. Also, Newton had a miscarriage. "That was the final challenge," she adds. They divorced at age 32.

Leading up to her 40th birthday, Newton bought herself a retirement home on Lake Hamilton in Little Rock. The entire third floor is a master bedroom suite. Her brother and sister-in-law have their own house key. Her parents and friends enjoy the house, too. Lately, Newton scarcely goes a month without seeing her family.

She's realistic about why she purchased the home now. As much as she would love to be saving for a college fund, she doesn't have children. "I am not so sure that children are part of my life story as much as I would have wanted them to be," she says.

Searching for the man of her dreams is not something that consumes her. She likes who she is and enjoys her family and friends more than anything. But if it happens, if she meets that special man, she'll be ready for it. *W*