

Jan







# The Great Wahl

by Andrea Stuart / photography by Alessandro Desogos

Infamous for her playfully-brimmed hats and acerbic sentiments about overblown Hollywood blockbusters, Jan Wahl epitomizes what it means to live out loud. With a candid approach to life, Wahl has never taken a backseat to integrity as she delved head-first into her roles as Emmy Award-winning director, documentarian, movie critic, journalist, teacher, and moxie-enthusiast extraordinaire.

Wahl learned to be the architect of her own life while growing up in West Los Angeles. Her parents, auctioneers by trade, cultivated Wahl and her sisters with sentiments such as, “find a career before a man.” And they used family dinnertime as an opportunity for critical thinking exercises, engaging in conversations that included talking about the best and worst things that happened during the day, and how each person overcame their hurdles. Their support, open-mindedness, and trust fortified Wahl’s tenacious attitude.

Cinematic encomium also had its influence. “*Citizen Kane*, for example, shows how happiness is an inside job,” says Wahl. And while on-screen role models Rosalind Russell, Ginger Rogers, Katharine Hepburn, Bette Davis, and Joan Crawford further reinforced Wahl’s sterling values, in-person rendezvous with stars made their imprints as well. When Wahl was young, her mom would drop her off at Cherokee Bookstore on Hollywood Boulevard—Wahl collected old photo play and movie magazines, especially those with Clark Gable and Asta, the dog from *The Thin Man*—a purlieu for paradigmatic Hollywood royalty, many of whom took Wahl under their proverbial wings.

In school, a time when people can feel most vulnerable, Wahl always found a way to climb over her challenges. Born with a significant speech impediment, Wahl was 13 or 14 before she learned to speak properly (with the help of a therapist). “People often think I’m from New York, but it’s just how I developed my speech pattern,” she jokes. “I used to sound like Daffy Duck.” Wahl, who, at times walked blocks out of her way to avoid being teased, ultimately became the first female student senate president at her high school. “One of the first things I did was lead the dress code initiative (to get rid of it). I was constantly looking for challenges,” recalls Wahl, who re-watched *The King’s Speech* due to its emotional connection with her.

Growing up next door to the entertainment industry provided Wahl with a syllabus of material for her career. No stranger to movie sets, Wahl found the process of movie making to be slow and careful. Conversely, she found the fast and dirty pace of live television fascinating. She learned this in her teens while working on the show *Youth and Police at KTLA*. “I love ‘live’ because I don’t want a chance to redo it. I love it raw. I want the scenery to fall down and people to mess up. Chaos is a blast.” And Wahl has witnessed her share of live chaos. One of her favorite examples? A Beatles concert at Dodger Stadium when she was 13: the police began throwing night sticks at the kids who excitedly charged the stage before John Lennon (Wahl’s favorite Beatle) stopped the show and told the police to cease their actions. “These are our fans,” Wahl imitates Lennon’s Liverpudlian accent. “They can come around us! [Lennon turned to the audience] Show them that you’re cool kids, and you’re gonna let us take our car and leave at the end.” And they did.

Wahl is one apple that doesn’t fall far from the tree. Author Kay Goldman wrote a book about Wahl’s grandmother titled, *With a Pistol in One Pocket and a Doll in the Other*, a biography that details the life of the 15-year-old married Santa Fe trailblazer who survived stampedes and interludes with Native Americans. “It’s pure courage!” says Wahl. Wahl believes in harnessing every teachable moment that comes her way and she’s spreading that knowledge to younger generations. Not only does she serve as a radio and television movie critic (no, you won’t find her on Twitter), columnist, and auctioneer, she is a lecturer and educator who currently teaches Critical Thinking of the Mass Media to youngsters, mentoring them to articulate their thoughts and challenge the media. “I teach them to be critics themselves,” Wahl says.

It is Wahl’s innate propensity to be a swan among ducks. Born with the intestinal fortitude to be distinctive, she has created her brand of supernova. Having cultivated loving relationships with her mother, siblings, husband, and pooches, the life of Jan Wahl is a life rich in love and courage; two ingredients she could never live without.