



ANCHORS AWAY  
Deborah Norville on the  
*Today*-show set.

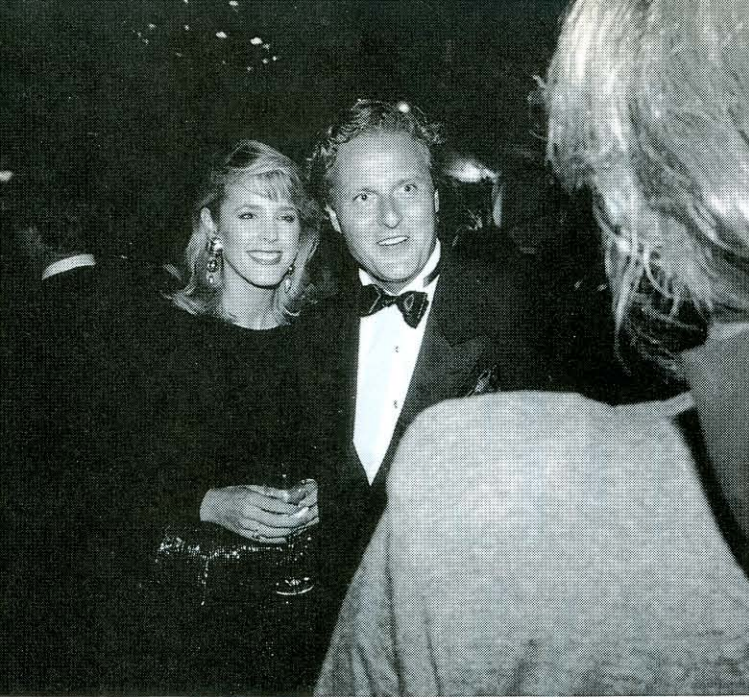
# NBC's GREAT BLONDE HOPE

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As soon as she sat on it, the famous *Today*-show couch became uncomfortably hot for Deborah Norville. But throughout all the flak she kept her cool and kept her own counsel. Now she, and the man behind her promotion, talk to EDWARD KLEIN

Deborah Norville was saying, "I'm very normal. I come from a nice, small town where people take care of their own. I was brought up with a good value system." She sat just four feet away from me across an empty table, tossing out these loaded words—"normal," "small town," "value system"—with her crisp cadences, the little tilts of the head, the twinkle in the eyes. She had said she was finally ready to talk at length about her role in the recent crisis on the *Today* show—seriously, one reporter to another—but instead she was delivering a statement refined almost to the point of on-air mannerism. "My

Photograph by JONATHAN BECKER



#### SOCIAL STUDY

Norville at a charity fund-raiser at Mortimer's with her husband, Karl Wellner.

father would always quote the old saying 'Be careful who you step on on the way up, because you may have to lean on them on the way down.' "

She was saying things like *that*. I told her I found it hard to believe that she was as two-dimensional as the woman she was portraying. I had been following her on and off television during the past couple of months; I had already interviewed more than forty people who knew her, starting with her friends back in high school, and *they* all suggested that she was far more complicated than she was giving herself credit for.

And then something happened: she gave me another Deborah Norville. Her padded shoulders slumped. Her chiseled jaw started to sag. The lips quivered. Her voice grew hoarse. In an instant, she was somebody else, a person cracking under the weeks of strain, the constant battering by the press. She seemed to be coming apart in front of my eyes.

"I don't know what I'm all about," she said. "I work so hard. I come from a background where as a reporter you don't get in the way of the story, but now I'm on the *Today* show, which is clearly unlike any other product produced by NBC News, and I've got all these people saying, 'Reveal yourself. Give me more, Deb, give me *more!*' I've got a producer on another show who's been waiting to see me for days. My poor husband's suits don't get to the cleaners. We're redoing a new apartment and we don't have a place to live. I'm burning it at both ends right now."

For a moment, a film clouded her blue eyes, and I thought of William Hurt in that scene in *Broadcast News* where he demonstrates how he can produce television tears on demand. Where, I was wondering, was the downy southern belle with the will of steel I'd been hearing about, the Tri Delt sorority sister who blasted her way out of small-town Georgia when she was in her early twenties? Where was the TV natural, bred in the bone, of whom her former news director in Chicago had said, "I've been looking for ten years for another Deborah Norville"?

"Talking to her was like getting punched in the solar plexus by a ball of cotton candy."

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Maybe it could all be explained by her youth. In fact, her age (she's thirty-one), those lips (full and lavishly lip-sticked), her blond good looks ("Women in New York would kill for a nose like this," she joked) were widely blamed for driving Jane Pauley, thirty-nine, to distraction—and ultimately from the bosom of the *Today* "family" in October. Although there was no evidence that Deborah had pushed Jane, the media tended to view the situation as a cat-fight and Norville as the one with the sharper nails.

Tom Brokaw, NBC News's living logo, said he felt sorry for her. "She's been rocketing up through the ranks into this intense glare, and it's been a disorienting experience," he told me. "She's a pretty self-confident person, but she's a little bewildered right now."

When I interviewed Deborah Norville, she was preparing to take over as Bryant Gumbel's co-anchor on the *Today* show this month, and she had to be ranked right up there along with the dozen or so brightest stars of broadcast news, whose indefinable talent to cut across our television screens earns them salaries in the millions. Beleaguered executives at NBC, whose News division had fallen on such dark days that there was talk about its very survival, looked upon Norville as their great blonde hope, the polestar that could guide them into the 1990s.

"I don't consider myself tough at all," she was saying. "My image of myself is that one of these days I'll lose those fifteen pounds. I don't think of myself as a gorgeous woman. I'm kind of above the ugliness scale, but there are people who are far prettier, far more intelligent. I'm always tired. I have to be chipper and interesting to be with tonight at dinner with my husband, but sometimes I'm not so chipper and delightful to be with. I'm certainly not the most aggressive cat that ever walked."

This self-portraiture was not only at dramatic variance with the way she was drawn in the press but also radically different from the picture some of her colleagues in television painted. At NBC News, the corridors were abuzz with references to Norville as "the Stepford Anchor." And a ranking news executive at a rival network spoke for many when he said that he found it hard to take her journalistic credentials seriously. "If the president of the United States were shot at nine in the morning, and Deborah Norville had to go on and give the facts to the nation and the world," he said, "there is no reason to believe that she would be quali-



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(Continued from page 81) passed within a foot and a half of each other with not the slightest acknowledgment.

"This whole episode," Deborah Norville admitted to me, "would fall into the category of what they don't teach at Harvard Business School." Yet, for the past three years, NBC has been part of a \$50-billion-a-year conglomerate known as General Electric, which prides itself on being the best-managed industrial enterprise in America. So how was it possible for the powers that be in such a company to allow the changes at the *Today* show to turn into an embarrassing soap opera?

An answer to that question has to begin with Robert Wright, the president and C.E.O. of NBC, and the troubles he was having with the News division. *NBC Nightly News* seemed permanently stuck in third place and, along with the other networks' evening news programs, it was losing its audience at such a steady pace that in a few years' time it could be down in the ratings cellar with public television. The *Today* show was drawing disappointing demographics among women between eighteen and forty-nine, and it too seemed inexorably headed south, toward second place after ABC's *Good Morning Ameri-*

*ca.* Despite all its efforts, NBC was still the only network that had failed to launch a successful prime-time news program. Its affiliates were in a state of incipient revolt over NBC News's miserable performance on such breaking stories as the student demonstrations in China and the plane crash in Sioux City, Iowa. And massive rounds of cost slashing—which had chopped some \$60 million, or roughly 20 percent, out of the news budget—had helped to cripple a valuable repertory company of seasoned talent that once included Connie Chung, Ken Bode, John Hart, Judy Woodruff, and Chris Wallace.

To Bob Wright and others at NBC, Deborah Norville had proved herself to be a one-woman exception to all this bad news during the little over two years she had been at the network. Every morning at six, she was delivering the news on *Sunrise*. By seven, she was often substituting on the *Today*-show couch, where she was buoyed by the latest 1989 Q Ratings, which rank appeal and familiarity; she was rated eleventh on the list of newscasters, the highest woman on the list, ahead of Connie Chung, Barbara Walters, and Diane Sawyer. At noon, she was feeding news updates to the two-hundred-odd affiliates, who hadn't been too happy

with NBC News until *she* came along. On prime time, she was anchoring *Bad Girls*, a tabloid confection of sex and violence which was the highest-ranked news special on any network—not just this year but in all of television history. And late at night, still fresh and perky, she was doing imitations of barnyard animals on the David Letterman show, whose producers were impressed less by her *moos* and *oinks* than by her demographic appeal to the young and the restless.

Late last July, Norville received a call informing her that Dick Ebersol, the new senior vice president in charge of *Today*, wanted to meet with her. She still had more than two years to run on her \$400,000-a-year *Sunrise* contract, and she said she had no inkling that Ebersol was planning to offer her the chance to replace John Palmer, fifty-four, as the newsreader on *Today*. "I didn't know whether he was friend or foe," she said.

"*Sunrise*, as done by Deborah, was a sort of one-person bravura performance," Ebersol told me. "I came into the job disposed to take Deborah, who was extraordinarily adept at talking on her feet, and improve the news in order to stop the slide on the show. I spent hours with Jane and Bryant, telling them of my plans, down to

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who would do the lead-ins, where Deborah would sit. The whole agenda was a creative one out of my head. I wasn't exposed to the research, and I absolutely didn't know about her Q Ratings."

Ebersol also denied later accounts that he was panicked into promoting Norville by secret maneuvers on the part of CBS Broadcast Group president Howard Stringer. The CBS boss had already embarrassed NBC by luring away Connie Chung, and some said that Stringer was now making a move on Norville. "Deborah had no escape window of any kind in her contract—it wasn't like she was a free agent," Ebersol said, "and at no point did we ever proceed with any idea that anybody was after her." Stringer himself denied to me that he had made a serious run at Norville. Yet when Stringer talked to Liz Smith in November, he had a different story: "He told me that he had made this enormous effort to get Deborah Norville." Questioned again, Stringer said through a spokesperson that there were no negotiations with Norville.

"Yes, there was interest in her at CBS," said someone intimately familiar with the situation, "but there was also interest from any number of people in cable and syndication. The changes at *Today* weren't made for that reason. They were made because of good, smart production decisions."

Norville's deal reportedly more than doubled her salary, and, in dollar terms at least, pulled her practically even with Jane Pauley, who had helped hold the show together for years, even through the recent embarrassment caused by Bryant Gumbel when someone at NBC leaked a private memo of his that was a fusillade against weatherman Willard Scott and other colleagues at the show. More important than money, Ebersol dangled before Norville the opportunity to become the first newsreader in the *Today* show's thirty-eight-year history to sit alongside the anchors on the famous couch.

Among her bosses at NBC, Norville had been singled out for even bigger things than *Today*. She would not only read the news, she would anchor it in back-and-forth conversations with correspondents, and she would also replace Bryant and Jane when they went on vacation. She would anchor news specials on prime time, and report investigative "Spotlight" pieces on *Nightly News*. She would be a frequent substitute for Tom Brokaw. She would be lent out by the

News division to anchor high-ratings entertainment events like the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. And she'd have a role in the coverage of the 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona.

Ebersol met with Deborah Norville and her agent, Jim Griffin, in the first weeks of August, and the negotiations went smoothly enough. Then *USA Today* reported the story with a "Watch out, Jane Pauley" lead, and Pauley threatened to stalk out of the network. "Jane went through a period of time when she didn't want to stay at NBC, but there was no way we would let her out," said one executive. "Jane now feels that she couldn't say how she felt about John Palmer," Ebersol said, "because she didn't want to stand in the way of another woman's career."

Pauley's ultimate defection from the show meant that the negotiations with agent Griffin had to start all over again for another new contract for Norville. The on-air announcement of the change on the show was further delayed by the internal turmoil resulting from the coverage of the San Francisco earthquake. "The most important thing in broadcasting today is being your own spin doctor," Ebersol told me, "but for five or six weeks my spin doctor—*me*—had to be silent."

"I worked closely with Deborah—day in, day out—for the better part of two years," an NBC colleague said. "When this thing happened, if it had been anybody else, they would have called me for advice or whatever. But this isn't Deborah's way. And that, in my view, explains what happened when Jane Pauley decided she had to leave the show. The minute Jane was perceived to be threatened by this younger woman, there was a whole support system in the NBC building that came to her aid. Deborah didn't have a support network that would step in the first time someone wrote an article about her as 'the other woman.' She's very private, enclosed, guarded. She's not the kind of person who confides in colleagues and strangers. She's all business."

She's been that way from the start. SBrandt Ayers, the owner of a small group of Alabama newspapers, recalled meeting Deborah Anne Norville when she was twenty years old. "I was down at the University of Georgia as a guest lecturer, and I ran into this coed who had these golden curls and a delicate face with the slightest pink of camellia blushing through magnolia white. She was almost too pretty, too *pastel*, to be true.

"Debbie Norville was a student mem-

ber of the advisory board of the College of Journalism, and she was already doing on-camera work for the CBS affiliate in Atlanta," he continued, paraphrasing a column he had written at the time for one of his newspapers. "So, naturally, I mentioned to her how she was entering a difficult universe in broadcast journalism—how in the ruthless, me-first competition of network news, reporters get prematurely tough."

Like practically everyone else I interviewed for this story, Ayers was struck by the apparent incongruity between Norville's golden-girl looks and her gritty, unflinching ambition. "Talking to her was like getting punched in the solar plexus by a ball of cotton candy," he said. "She looked at me when I warned her about the life she had in store, and then, in a voice that sounded like it was made of dry ice, she said, 'That's O.K. with me. It's the way they separate the ones who're going to make it from the ones who have to work in East Jesus.'"

The East Jesus she had in mind was Dalton, Georgia, a town near the Tennessee border. "As a kid growing up in Dalton," she said, "I watched TV, but it didn't have any application to my life. No news happened in Dalton, so TV was a window to look beyond."

Dalton was known as the carpet capital and the divorce capital of America, and Deborah Norville's family—she was the second of four daughters—was very much part of that tradition. Her father, Zachary, was a textile engineer and a prosperous entrepreneur who owned a company that supplied floor-covering materials to the carpet industry. He was known throughout the county as a colorful character who raised cattle on a 630-acre spread, where he taught Debbie and her sisters how to slop hogs and grow watermelons. People who know Zach said that, much as he loved his daughters, he missed not having a son. On weekends he rode motorcycles and raced dirt-track cars, and he once crash-landed his twin-engine Piper near his own airstrip.

"He's a man's man, a rawboned, locker-room kinda guy who likes to work hard and play hard," said one of Zach Norville's former customers and an occasional drinking buddy. "Zach has an eye for pretty girls and likes to judge the Resaca Beach Poster Girl Contest, the premier social event in Dalton. He's a salesman at heart, like Willy Loman, a guy with a great smile and a practical joke. When someone asked him to pay by credit card, he'd hand them a green card with the words 'Major Credit Card' printed on it in

reverse white. He always had a way of getting some sort of attention.”

Bert Lance, the budget director in the Carter administration, who has since returned to his private business in nearby Calhoun, remembered that when it came to business Zach was strictly Mr. Outside, “while his wife, Merle, stayed inside and ran things.” Zach Norville agrees. “Merle and I were partners from the start,” he told me. “When I met her, she was the corporate secretary and sales-promotion manager for a sock-and-anklet company. She was more business-oriented by far than the average female, and she had a lot of *savoir* in the numbers-crunching business. She’s probably where the girls got all their smarts and where Debbie got her photographic memory.”

Zach and the attractive Merle, who came from Swedish stock, were divorced when Debbie was fourteen. The traumatic event was made even more difficult by the fact that her mother suffered from rheumatoid arthritis. “Her mother was crippled,” recalled Marla Martin, who went to high school with Debbie and who is now a reporter on the Dalton *Daily Citizen-News*. “It was very difficult for her mother to get around, and Debbie ended up doing a lot of the shopping and the stuff around the house.”

Being daily witness to her mother’s helplessness was a lot for a young girl to bear. According to Zach, “If Debbie has one shortcoming, she does have a temper.” Later, she also began to suffer from headaches. By the time she was in her early teens, she was already looking for a way out. When she was seventeen, she followed a familiar route taken by Diane Sawyer and other future television news personalities and entered a beauty contest. She won the Georgia Junior Miss pageant on the strength of her looks and magic tricks she performed.

“I was raised in California, away from the beauty-pageant environment,” said William Lee, one of Norville’s professors at the University of Georgia. “But I came to know this was very serious stuff when I came to the South. Girls who compete at this level have received very extensive training in etiquette, dance, some sort of musical skill, or lessons that give them bearing and composure. It’s a very important part of southern culture. People regard it as a real stepping-stone to other things, and girls in those pageants frequently major in communications or journalism.”

Fortunately for Debbie Norville, the University of Georgia, a football-crazed school known for hard-drinking fraterni-

ties and pecking-order sororities, also just happened to have a decent journalism department that was strong in the area of broadcast news. She was a natural on-camera talent. “We could ask her to do things that other students couldn’t even attempt to do,” said Al Wise, a professor at the Henry W. Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication. “Debbie and members of the senior class put together a documentary about women athletes seeking equal federal funding with men. She was the anchor. She did a two-minute stand-up from memory, and she looked exactly and sounded exactly like she does today, ten years later.”

While at school, she was selected to be an intern on a public-television program called *The Lawmakers*, a series of reports on the Georgia legislature. “I was watching television, switching channels, and I came across this young woman on public television giving a report, and it was a god-awful boring subject, but I found myself interested in the reporter,” recalled Shelley Schwab, who was then the station manager of WAGA, the CBS affiliate in Atlanta. “The next day, I spoke to the news director and told him to locate her, and he brought Debbie Norville into the station. She had tremendous poise and

presence. You don’t often see young people like that. And she was very focused on being a journalist.”

So, at nineteen, she was doing *The Lawmakers*, commuting sixty miles to Atlanta to work at WAGA on weekends, and maintaining a straight-A average. In Atlanta, she shared a furnished apartment on Shallowford Road with another student intern, Leah Keith. “She’d wake up in the morning, put herself together, and was ready to go,” said Keith, who is now an assistant district attorney in New York and married to Daniel Cohen, a member of the Sulzberger clan, which controls *The New York Times*. “I would find in covering legislation that I would be missing some detail, and I would look to Deb and she would have it. She was good at assembling facts quick and getting it on the air. She was in control.”

Her mother died while she was in college. When Debbie graduated, she slid right into a full-time reporter’s job at WAGA, and into a romantic entanglement with a sportscaster at the station who was twelve years her senior, a former Atlanta Falcons running back named Harmon Wages. He was six feet three and sandy-haired, weighed two hundred pounds, and was known in Atlanta as “Charmin’ Har-



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## Deborah Norville

mon.” He earned nearly \$100,000 a year—a sizable chunk of which was going up his nose in cocaine—and when he escorted Norville to discos and bars, they dressed in matching, full-length mink coats he had purchased for them. “He was her stepping-stone,” said a prosecutor who worked in the U.S. Attorney’s Office in Atlanta at the time. “He was the celebrity, not Deb Norville, and he was well received in the highest echelons, and he spent a lot of money on her, and she loved it.”

He did more than that; he brought her videotapes to the attention of his New York agent, Jim Griffin, and gave her critiques of her work on television. Even after she was lured away to Chicago in 1982 by an NBC affiliate for a salary of about \$55,000, Wages would fly up and visit her on weekends. “She was so straight she squeaked,” Wages told me. “She’s very religious. She used to pray by the bed at night in a Mickey Mouse nightgown and little white socks.”

Sometime in 1984, the squeaky-clean Deborah Norville received a visit from agents of the F.B.I. They told her that her boyfriend of five years had been busted on charges of possession and distribution of cocaine, and they asked her what she knew about it. She flew down to Atlanta and testified for the prosecution. “Harmon told me that he had used drugs before,” she told the court. “I told him if he wanted to date me exclusively... I wouldn’t tolerate his using drugs... and Harmon promised to me he would not be using drugs in the future.” After Wages was convicted on four counts of possession, for which he served a prison term of three months, he said in an interview, “Debbie Norville ran like a scalded dog.” Today he has only the kindest things to say about her: “She doesn’t have a bad bone in her body.”

During our interview, I asked Norville how it was possible for a reporter not to know that her boyfriend was heavily involved with cocaine. “My dad wasn’t terribly fond of him,” she said. “I was young when I met him. Like many men and women who place trust in someone, my trust was violated.”

She was a big hit in Chicago. “She could eat the lens,” said Monte Newman, who was the general manager of station WMAQ at the time. “She took the town by storm. We started her on the weekend newscast as a co-

anchor, and then moved her into the 4:30 newscast, and the numbers went off the boards. Everybody knew this kid was a star.”

Her male bosses, as always, were quick to respond to her telegenic beauty and then, more slowly, to the person behind the blond mask. “She had a real Georgia accent, and I remember telling her that her accent was pretty far South,” said Paul Beavers, the former WMAQ news director. “And without missing a beat she slipped into a native Chicago accent and said to me, ‘Do you think it’s at least up to the South Side of Chicago?’ It was just a matter of a few weeks and she was absolutely wired into what was going on in Chicago. I remember asking her when she first came to work, ‘Do you have a place to live?’ and she ticked off three or four realtors, and she was about to sign on a condo and make some real-estate investments. She knew what she was doing.”

Her producer in Chicago, Suzanne Mangione, thought it remarkable that this fierce on-air competitor was very feminine offscreen. “I found it fascinating that she made her own clothes,” said Mangione, who is now a producer on *USA Today on TV*. “She did her own wall-papering. She upholstered her own furniture. She was big at writing notes to friends and talking about her family. She was a real, genuine person.”

Norville is proud of a documentary she did in Chicago on battered women, which generated a tremendous response from her viewers. She also covered breaking news stories, like Mayor Harold Washington and the city’s racial tensions. Within a couple of years, she became a local news celebrity in the Second City, but the small-town girl still found time to return to Georgia, where she dropped in on Tom Houck’s popular WGST radio talk show and addressed journalism students at the University of Georgia. Her old professor Al Wise treated her like a visiting dignitary who had proved that women could manage their own broadcast careers. “I told her that her relationship with Harmon Wages was the only thing she ever did that was stupid, and she sort of agreed with me. She said, ‘Now that I look back on it, I wonder why, too.’ It was the only thing she did that didn’t make sense.”

Then Deborah Norville did something else that didn’t make sense. She posed for fashion photographer Victor Skrebneski, and a picture appeared in the October 1985 issue of *Chicago* magazine. She looked pouty, windblown, and, to all appearances, naked. “It only looked like she was nude,” said Skrebneski. “Actu-

ally, she was wearing a strapless tube top. She did her own hair, and the fan did the rest. I didn’t see her as a newswoman; I saw her as glamorous.”

The cheesecake picture brought down on Deborah Norville the same instant opprobrium that befell Diane Sawyer when she posed seductively for Annie Leibovitz in 1987. “The people who worked with Norville at Channel 5 were unhappy with her,” said Steve Daley, who was then writing TV criticism for the *Chicago Tribune*. “It revived the whole business of the gorgeous game-show hostess reading the news. On the other hand, her work and her appearance got New York’s attention.”

She also got the attention of a visiting New York businessman named Karl Gert Wellner. A tall, charming Swede of Estonian extraction, Wellner was a member in good standing of the chic European set that dined at Mortimer’s and danced in Manhattan’s trendy discos. He was a graduate of Stockholm’s prestigious School of Economics, and he had tried his hand at operating a sportswear boutique and an export-import business before he landed a job as head of U.S. operations of Habsburg, Feldman, a minor, Swiss-based fine-arts auction house with a grand name. In the summer of 1985, friends in Sweden suggested to Wellner that on his next trip to Chicago he look up a promising young newswoman of Swedish background named Deborah Norville.

They met for cocktails—he was thirty-one, she was twenty-seven—and she insisted on paying the check. “She explained to me,” recalled one of Norville’s friends, “that in Karl’s crowd there aren’t very many women of substance. The women come from money, and they’re not hardworking, and she said it was important to have something that was your own, to stand out, to make you more distinctive. Paying for that first date showed she was an independent woman.”

Soon Deborah was commuting to New York to spend time with Karl. “I was scared to come to New York even for a visit,” she said. But when the then president of NBC News, Larry Grossman, called and said he liked her work and offered her the anchor job on *Sunrise*, she jumped at the chance.

What she found in New York was enough to dismay the toughest veteran of the television wars. Larry Grossman was the seventh News president in twenty years in NBC’s bureaucratic jungle, and not long after Norville arrived, Grossman had a falling-out with his new

bosses at General Electric. NBC president Bob Wright conducted a lengthy search for his replacement. One of the prospective candidates for the job remembers a lunch he had with Wright at the Four Seasons restaurant. "Wright was engaging, extremely smart, a quick learner, and very confident when it came to talking news," he said, "though he seemed on less sure ground on what NBC News ought to be about. He seemed quite taken with what he called TV tabloid journalism."

With the enthusiastic backing of Tom Brokaw, Wright finally hired Michael Gartner, a man with an impressive résumé: former Page One editor of *The Wall Street Journal*, former president and editorial chairman of *The Des Moines Register*, past president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, member of the Pulitzer Prize Board, nationally syndicated columnist, and consultant to *USA Today*.

For all this experience, Gartner knew little about the technically complicated, star-studded world of broadcast news, and he was soon being blamed for all the woes at the network. The affiliates howled when he let Connie Chung slip from his grasp and go over to CBS—a move that left NBC with just two major on-camera stars, Brokaw and Gumbel, compared with the murderers' row being assembled at ABC. And veteran staffers at the NBC network as well as station owners found Gartner to be cocky to the point of being contemptuous of television news in general.

His reputation wasn't much better outside NBC. Recently, when ABC News president Boone Arledge and CBS News president David Burke met for a friendly drink, they actually joined in a mock toast to the continued tenure of their competitor.

Gartner didn't buy the rap that he was destroying what was left of NBC News. "I'm already 70 percent through the changes that I intend to make here," he told me with great self-assurance. And, in fact, under G.E.'s bottom-line prodding, Gartner was in the process of smashing NBC's traditional journalistic fiefdoms, which were wedded almost exclusively to *Nightly News*, and creating in their place a cost-efficient central news desk that would service "multiple clients," such as the affiliates, NBC's seven owned stations, cable operators, newly privatized broadcasters in Europe, and the videocassette market. His business plan called for him to stanch a \$40 million annual loss and break even in 1990.

But Gartner's revolution was about

more than just money; he and Wright had set out to change the very structure of the network. The strict separation of the News, Sports, and Entertainment divisions, a separation that had been honored for decades, was coming to an end. And this was signaled by the arrival last spring of Dick Ebersol, who was made president of Sports and senior vice president of News in charge of the *Today* show.

A tall, boyish-looking programming maven who cut his television teeth back in the seventies, first as an executive assistant in Sports for Boone Arledge, then with *Saturday Night Live*, Ebersol had only recently been lured away from his own lucrative interests in a number of independent television production companies. He had the reputation of being a man with plenty of smarts and not too much taste; his recent efforts included *Friday Night Videos*, *Later with Bob Costas*, and a wrestling show called *Saturday Night's Main Event*.

Ebersol was also known as a master office politician, and he had the right friends to help him along. When he ran NBC's comedy and variety department back in the late seventies, he hired Brandon Tartikoff as a fledgling programmer. The two men have remained fast friends ever since; their wives (Ebersol is married to the actress Susan Saint James) socialize, and Tartikoff is the godfather of one of Ebersol's children. More important, Tartikoff is now the president of NBC's immensely profitable Entertainment division, the so-called "House of Hits," whose prime-time programs (*The Cosby Show*, *Cheers*, *L.A. Law*) have led in ratings for so long that it has virtually blown away the other two networks.

Although Tartikoff sat thousands of miles away in Burbank, California, his power reached beyond Entertainment all the way to New York and into the other divisions of the network. "Thirty Rockefeller Plaza is looked upon as G.E.'s oil well in Manhattan," said Ebersol, "and nobody's more responsible for this than Brandon." G.E.'s tough chairman, Jack Welch, was known to adore Brandon Tartikoff. "Welch wants to win as much as I do," Tartikoff once said.

"Because of Brandon's success," said Ebersol, "he basically controls prime time on NBC, and if you want to get a vehicle on prime time, you have to go to him and make your case why you'd be pre-empting his successful lineup." As head of a newly created program-development group, Tartikoff was responsible for thinking up one "news" show, *Yester-*

*day, Today and Tomorrow*, which relied on the journalistically questionable technique of dramatic re-creations. There was considerable public criticism of this technique, and in November NBC announced that such shows would no longer be produced by the News division, but would be handled by the Entertainment division.

As might be expected, Ebersol stays in close touch with Tartikoff. "I told Brandon about the changes I intended to make on *Today* after I told Bryant and Jane, but before Deborah knew," Ebersol said. Those changes, it turned out, were not a problem for Bryant Gumbel, who was known to have a lack of enthusiasm for Jane Pauley. "Last year, when Pauley was on vacation, Norville subbed for her, and Gumbel was thrilled," said someone familiar with all the politicking. "They flirted on air like mad."

Deborah Norville entered this labyrinth of male bonding and corporate ambitions at the beginning of 1987. A year later, she and Karl Wellner were married in a Swedish candlelight ceremony in St. James' Episcopal Church on Madison Avenue. She sewed her bridesmaids' dresses. Her three sisters were there, as were her father, Zach, and his second wife,

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## Deborah Norville

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Rita. Friends who attended the reception at the Lotus Club remember it as a lot of fun. A hot, dark-skinned Brazilian dance band entertained the tables of cool, blond Swedes.

Since the wedding, Deborah Norville has been on a treadmill, and her conversation revolves around three subjects: job, sleep, husband. Her alarm clock goes off at ten minutes to four in the morning, and there's an NBC limo waiting in front of her pleasant East Side address to whisk her off to the studio. She writes all of the seven o'clock news broadcast on *Today* and parts of the other three segments. She often spends twelve to fifteen hours at work.

There have been times when the strain has gotten to her. "I've seen her temper flash when things got screwed up," said a producer who has worked with her. "She'd flare up at the crew and the cameramen. Some of the older pros don't exhibit that kind of temper. She didn't come near being a Jessica Savitch, but Deborah would lash out at people in

public and demand, 'Why can't you get this right?' "

She tries to make time for old Chicago friends like Leah Keith and Erin Moriarty—a quick bite of lunch at the American Festival Cafe in Rockefeller Center, tea at the Plaza. Sometimes she talks about her desire to have a family, even though she doesn't relish the idea of bringing up kids in New York. She'll grab an hour's nap during the day so that she can accompany her husband to a business dinner at night. On weekends, she and Karl drive out to their home in Southampton, where she gardens and they occasionally entertain. "It's a very pleasant, comfortable sort of getaway rather than a statement," said Jack Cowell, one of their Hamptons acquaintances.

Even among her friends of many years, none claimed to know Deborah Norville very well. She was described with words like "private," "guarded," "close to the vest." Yet many women—especially women in the brutally competitive field of television—told me that they admired her a great deal. "This is a woman of the nineties," said Jill Brooke, the TV and

radio columnist of the *New York Post*. "She has brains, beauty, a gorgeous husband, and a very successful career. She has it all."

Not quite. It is still too soon to assess what damage has been done to Deborah Norville, both personally and professionally, by the badly bungled way she was heralded onto the *Today* show. "The talent on the show has been hurt," Dick Ebersol admitted. "They were really innocent pawns in this. It bothers me what's happened to Deborah." At the very least, Norville will have to labor for some time under an unfortunate image—the leggy blonde who was used by her male bosses to hype the morning ratings.

Ebersol didn't help matters by once stating that Norville was hired "to appeal to women." "I may have said that," he told me, "but the reason Deborah's on the air is because of her unique talents in being able to think on her feet and project cohesiveness. There are very few people in television who can do that in complete sentences without the aid of scripts or enormous preparation. Deborah can. She's special." □