Life after Oprah

North Shore women talk about their memories of producing the epic show — and how life has treated them since

■ BY AMY MERRICK

On her first day of work at "The Oprah Winfrey Show," Jen Stamper was handed a box of videotapes and told to dub them. She asked where to go. The reply: "Figure it out."

So she did, wandering through the maze of hallways at Harpo Studios — a former roller rink on Chicago's West Side — until she found the right place.

"You learn how to be a problem-solver who can get things done," said Stamper, who spent 16 years with the program, working her way up to co-producer.

The long hours, tight deadlines and intense demands of the show wore on Harpo's employees — but they also created close bonds. The work felt meaningful. Lives were changed. After working there, returning to a normal schedule was a relief, but it was also a challenge. Nothing else created such a thrill.

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A handful of former Oprah producers — all North Shore residents — reminisced about the show recently and described how they had to rediscover themselves once they left.

Some departed on their own schedule, while others were forced to shift gears when "The Oprah Winfrey Show" ended in 2011, after a 25-year run in Chicago. A few worked briefly on other Harpo programs, such as the short-lived "The Rosie Show" or "The Dr. Oz Show." Winfrey, meanwhile, moved to Los Angeles to launch the OWN cable network.

Producers are the workhorses of any television program. At Harpo, they pitched show ideas, conducted background research, and found and interviewed guests. They assembled prerecorded segments, wrote scripts and supervised edits. Then they prepped the guests — and Oprah herself — for the actual taping.

Sixteen-hour workdays and sacrificed personal lives were common. As a new mom, Stamper spent her first Mother's Day at the office. When Firsel, a Northbrook resident, was dating her now-husband, she was constantly canceling plans to stay late.

Of course, there were also perks, including frequent celebrity encounters. Performances by Whitney Houston, Tina Turner and Madonna. Gwyneth Paltrow walking around backstage in a shirt and stockings while her skirt was being steamed.

And that notorious episode when Tom Cruise jumped on Oprah's couch, expressing his love for Katie Holmes?

"I love that moment!" said April Terrien, a former associate producer. "I don't care what anybody says."

Yet the real highlights had nothing to do with Hollywood. For Firsel, it was the 2004 episode when Oprah gave a Pontiac G-Six to every member of her audience. The footage of people leaping out of their chairs and Oprah shouting, "Everybody gets a car!" became one of the show's best-known moments.

For Stamper of Northbrook, it was working on a program with Elie Wiesel, the Nobel Peace Prize-winner and author of "Night." The producers chose 50 students who had written essays inspired by the book. One girl, Clemantine, was a Rwandan refugee living in America, who hadn't seen her parents in 12 years. On the show, Clemantine and her sister were reunited with their family, whom Oprah had flown to Chicago as a surprise.

"That moment of them seeing each other..." said Stamper — and her eyes filled with tears.

Former producers for "The Oprah Winfrey Show" — Jen Stamper, Karen Firsel, and April Terrien — get together.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOEL LERNER

Oprah was always the driving force. While famously perfectionistic, she also showed her gratitude, sending handwritten notes of praise and taking employees to Hawaii or on a cruise.

"She has a way of making you feel like every person is there for a reason," said Terrien, who opted to stay home with her two children when the show ended, a choice she described as "the hardest I ever made."

A number of the producers left Harpo when they felt they couldn't give enough attention to their families. But for women who thrived on adrenaline, the decision felt like speeding along the expressway for years, then coming to an abrupt stop. Some were adrift for months as they recovered from chronic exhaustion.

"I needed to figure out who I was without Harpo," said Rosenthal, who worked for the studio for 12 years, ending as a senior supervising producer, creating promotions for upcoming episodes.

Part of that learning process has been spending time with her daughter, writing a book about finding her own birth mother and studying Bikram Yoga, which is practiced in a 105-degree space. "You have no choice but to stand in this room and stare at yourself in a mirror and really connect with yourself," she said.

The tenacious attitude required to keep pace at Harpo has given the women confidence to start new ventures. Firsel, a mother of two, has realized her longtime dream of being on camera, appearing in fashion and lifestyle segments for WGN. Stamper, who has four children, recently opened Juniper, a women's clothing boutique in Northbrook.

The producers remain close — they describe themselves as a "sorority" — and support each other's dreams. Stamper's new boutique sells beaded jewelry made by Highland Park resident Dana Hughes, a former Harpo promotions producer and mother of two who co-founded Danelle Designs about a year ago.

"Whether working at Harpo, being a mom or having a jewelry business, the skills are all transferable," said Hughes. ■