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IJ photo/Frankie Frost

Caricaturist Jeanne Koelsch of San Rafael shows a drawing that made the cover of TIME magazine from her scrapbook.



STARS IN HER EYES

San Rafael woman recalls years as caricaturist of rich, famous

By Beth Ashley | Marin Independent Journal

JEANNE KOELSCH'S SCRAPBOOK is filled with pictures of her with people like Tony Bennett, Duke Ellington, Nat "King" Cole, Jerry Lewis and Xavier Cugat.

Ah, those were the days — when Koelsch, now well past middle age, was a big-time model in New York, and on the verge of becoming — of all things — a caricaturist of famous people.

Koelsch, who doesn't want her age in print, has lived in San Rafael for 23 years, all of them a far cry from the glitz and glamor of her show-biz past.

Still lithe and impeccably turned out, Koelsch (pronounced Kelsh) gets a gleam in her blue eyes as she recalls her encounters with the rich and famous, first as a model at big-time events and conventions, later as a featured artist who sketched the faces of people like Bing Crosby, Joe Louis, Marilyn Monroe, Judy Garland, Dwight Eisenhower and poet Carl Sandburg.

She met Eleanor Roosevelt and Grace Kelly and attended Elizabeth Taylor's birthday party.

"They'd sit down and talk to me," she says. "It was like an American dream."

Recently, she wrote "Stumbling to the Stars," a book (intended for her family) that records those heady days. The book is available at Ama-



Koelsch began her career as a model in New York (left) but soon gravitated toward drawing, which allowed to create portraits of celebrities of the era, such as Phil Silvers (above) and Jerry Lewis (bottom left).

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Jeanne Koelsch,
EX-MODEL AND
CARICATURIST WHO
LIVES IN SAN RAFAEL



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STARS: Koelsch reviews a grand life, urges taking chances

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zon, Borders and Barnes & Noble.

Her son Philip, who lives in Southern Marin, says his mother's book "reads like a spectacular fairy tale, but she has the photos to prove it" — photos included in the back of her book. "I am very proud of what she accomplished — rising from a modest lifestyle to a career among the stars," he said.

In her book, Koelsch talks about growing up in a mining community in Pennsylvania, where streets sometimes collapsed into mining tunnels and the rituals of small-town America were deeply in place. Koelsch enjoyed them all: life in a hard-working family, an after-school job, learning to play piano and playing in a 20-piece dance band.

Still, she wanted more, and at age 17 signed up for a modeling class with the Barbizon Modeling School in New York City; \$5 for the class, \$5 for a week's stay in a hotel. Her first "modeling" job was as a cigarette girl at Billy Rose's Diamond Horseshoe Club.

The book details the other jobs that kept her afloat in New York City — clerking at Macy's, hostessing at Schrafft's. Gradually, she got more and more bookings for ad promotions, fashion shots and conventions; she became Miss Brooklyn Dodgers, the American Legion Poppy Queen and Miss NBC; at one point she spent three weeks in pre-Castro Cuba, acting as a greeter at a hotel in Veradero.

At one convention, she watched a caricaturist entertain guests with his work; she was intrigued, and inveigled herself a job as his assistant. At first, she helped him find bookings; gradually she helped him by filling in part time as a caricaturist herself. The secret, she said, was to exaggerate her subject's expressions.

After a time, she decided to strike out on her own,



IJ photo/Frankie Frost

Caricaturist Jeanne Koelsch displays a photo of her taken during her modeling days. The photo is part of a scrapbook.



This photo is Jeanne Koelsch in her modeling days. Koelsch has written a book about her adventures called, 'Stumbling to the Stars.'

borrowing \$100 from her father to print a brochure, a mailer for large companies and institutions. Her fees — \$150 an hour, plus first-class airfare and hotel accommodations. Her theory: "If you don't ask you don't get."

She was quickly booked by companies such as Breck, Firestone, Pepsi Cola, Scholl's and Time magazine. She spent an elegant week at the Greenbrier Hotel in West Virginia, working two two-hour shifts in return for a long sojourn in luxury. "I bought a lot of shoes, I got myself a mink coat," she said.

At every event, she recalled, people lined up to have their pictures drawn. She became highly adept, turning out one drawing every 1½ minutes. Time

magazine once challenged her to do one caricature every 30 seconds, which she managed to do.

Before each session her knees shook under the table, she said, but once drawing she calmed down. Afterwards, she'd be exhausted.

She also wrote an entertainment column and reviewed restaurants and stage shows. She designed most of her own clothes.

Her professional life quickly morphed into a busy social life in which celebrity clients became friends. She became a fixture on several TV shows, interviewing and drawing famous guests. She spent 12 years in this dizzying atmosphere, after which she married and — reluctantly, she said — gave up

I am very proud of what she accomplished — rising from a modest lifestyle to a career among the stars."

— Jeanne Koelsch's son Phillip

her career.

She gave birth to a son and daughter, but the marriage failed, and she spent ensuing years at a number of jobs: as national sales manager for an international company, as a real estate broker and cosmetics salesperson. Eventually she moved to San Rafael, where her children live.

In Marin she occupies herself with grandchildren, the Red Hat Ladies social group, playing piano and traveling. She worked for seven years with her daughter at the Vintage Gallery in Sausalito.

Longtime Marin friend Renee Gregory of Marinwood, says Koelsch is "very gracious, very loving, a wonderful person. Her past — mingling with celebrities — never made any difference; it never went to her head."

Koelsch says her goal in life has been "to do as much as I can, to learn as much as I can."

If there's a lesson to learn from her life, it's this: "If you want to have adventures in your life, take a chance."

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