



PHOTOS SPECIAL TO THE SUNDAY TIMES

West Pittston native and former model Jeanna Koelsch recently published her memoir, "Stumbling to the Stars," about her successful second career as a caricaturist. Ms. Koelsch sketched a number of famous celebrities like, from left, Jerry Lewis, Henry Youngman, Nat King Cole and Xavier Cugat.

## NO EXAGGERATION

Area native's memoir recounts life among stars as model, caricaturist

BY JOSH McAULIFFE  
STAFF WRITER

Jeanna Koelsch's early life reads a lot like a good, page-turning novel.

Young girl leaves her small town after high school to seek fun and excitement in New York City. Once there, she finds work as a model, then uses that as a launching pad to a successful second career as, of all things, a caricaturist.

As one would guess, it all made for a most interesting life. Now removed from

those glorious days by nearly a half century, Ms. Koelsch is finally putting them to paper with the memoir, "Stumbling To The Stars," a series of colorful anecdotes recalling her upbringing in West Pittston and her years as an independent woman working amid the glitz and glamour of 1950s New York and Hollywood.

Now 80 and living in San Rafael, Calif., Ms. Koelsch said friends had long encouraged her to write a book. After putting it off for a long time, she eventually decided it would be a nice keepsake for her children, and maybe even an inspiration to people to "take that leap and do something with their life," she said.

"I never would have thought in my wildest dreams this would have happened," said Ms. Koelsch, who worked on the book over a three-year period. "I was fortunate. It afforded me a good living and a great time. I wanted more out of life. And before I settled down, I wanted to see things."

### Played in band

As a teen growing up in West Pittston and Pittston, Ms. Koelsch, daughter of the late Rudolph and Catherine Koelsch, played piano in a local big band and displayed an early knack for drawing, with fashion being her favorite subject. It also was during this time that she first visited New York. Almost immediately, she was smitten with "the noise and hustle and bustle" of the city, she said.

Wanting to learn more "about life and people," she headed for the Big Apple with a friend right after graduating from Pittston High School in the summer of 1946. Arriving with just \$60 in her wallet, she enrolled in a \$5 class at the Barbizon Modeling School.

After a few odd jobs, the statuesque blonde began lining up modeling gigs, whether it was selling toys at Macy's or working as a cigarette girl at Billy Rose's Diamond Horseshoe Club. At one time or other, she was Miss NBC (she was interviewed on the "Today" show, Miss U.S. Marines, Miss Brooklyn Dodgers, Miss Silk Stockings and the American Legion Poppy Queen).

At a booking at the Waldorf Astoria, she met entertainer Jimmy Durante, who wanted to take her back to his hotel room. She turned him down, lying that she was engaged. He understood, and gave her two tickets for his show that night at the famed Copacabana.



KOELSCH



Ms. Koelsch, shown in the '50s, became a caricaturist after watching someone sketching guests at a convention. She called the man and he offered her a job as his assistant.



Ms. Koelsch was a successful model and had a number of different jobs like Miss NBC, Miss U.S. Marines, and Miss Brooklyn Dodgers.

### Meet Jeanna Koelsch

**Age:** 80  
**Residence:** A native of West Pittston, she's lived in San Rafael, Calif., for the past 22 years  
**Family:** The daughter of the late Rudolph and Catherine Koelsch, she has a son, Phillip Mann, and a daughter, Lynn Maniscalco. She has three siblings, Robert, Marion and Helen.  
**Career:** During the 1950s and early '60s, Ms. Koelsch had a successful career as a model and caricaturist. Her memories of that time can be found in her recent memoir, "Stumbling To The Stars," published by Xlibris Book Publishing. The book retails for \$29.99 hardback and \$19.99 paperback and can be purchased at [www.xlibris.com](http://www.xlibris.com), or at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).



she wrote to was Firestone. For the heck of it, she decided to make some very specific demands—\$150 an hour first-class airfare to and from her destination and top-notch hotel accommodations. "I just thought, well if you don't ask for it, you don't get it," she said.

### Corporate jobs

Well, it worked. Firestone hired her, and Colgate followed soon after. Before long, she was attending conventions and cocktail parties for many of the country's biggest companies, including Shell Oil, Anheuser Busch, Pepsi-Cola and Time magazine, which hired her a good dozen times a year.

At parties, she had to work especially fast, often churning out between 85 and 100 sketches in a 90-minute period.

Some assignments were more memorable than others. One took her to pre-Castro Cuba, where she was shot at by a mobster who became

"Dinner and everything on Durante," said Ms. Koelsch, who happily took a date there. "And I never heard from him again."

### Wanted change

For the most part, Ms. Koelsch enjoyed modeling, after a while she felt like she needed to do something that better engaged her mind. At a convention she was working at, she became fascinated by a caricaturist who was doing sketches of attendees.

So, she called the man up and he offered her a job as his assistant. Quickly, she proved

to have a talent for sketching a person's face with humorous exaggeration.

"For me, the most important thing is the expression," she said. "I felt it was more interesting and complimentary to the person to exaggerate their expression than their facial features."

"It's not the kind of thing you learn in school," she said of caricature. "You just have to have a feeling for it, an eye for it."

Ms. Koelsch's boss eventually became too difficult to work for, so she decided to strike out on her own. The first company

enraged when she tried to leave his party with another man. A few years later, after an engagement in Lancaster, she and hundreds of other people (including singer Frankie Avalon) became stranded in a blizzard on the Pennsylvania Turnpike. Ms. Koelsch walked several miles in her stocking feet to a Howard Johnson restaurant, where she called in reports to several media outlets.

For her efforts, Ms. Koelsch was well compensated. And she received plenty of perks, like the time one of her clients sent her to Cartier to pick out a diamond pin, on them.

Then, of course, there were the numerous celebrities she sketched. She worked at Elizabeth Taylor's birthday party, chatted with Marilyn Monroe on the 20th Century Fox lot in Hollywood and appeared on the television shows of Milton Berle and Steve Allen.

Some stars she got to know on a personal level. Every Sunday, she went to the home of legendary songwriter Sammy Kahn, where she hobnobbed with a still-together Jerry Lewis and Dean Martin. She danced with Walter Pidgeon, went on a date with Robert Stack, caught the attentions of Humphrey Bogart on a movie set and chatted with Frank Sinatra at his New York hangout, Jilly's.

"He was a little moody at times," she said of Mr. Sinatra. "I think it was when he had his problems with Ava Gardner."

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In her prime, Ms. Koelsch, here sketching actress Pier Angeli, was capable of producing between 85 and 100 caricatures in a 90-minute period.

## KOELSCH: Star memories

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She personally presented President Dwight D. Eisenhower with the caricature she did of him, and was in a relationship with a man whose brother was married to a Kennedy. Nikita Khrushchev just walked away from her as she sketched him, but her all-time favorite encounter, Eleanor Roosevelt ("I admired her so," she said), graciously shook her hand.

"That was just great fun," she said. "I thought this was all in stride, (part of) living in New York City."

But it didn't last forever. After getting married (she's now divorced), Ms. Koelsch moved to the suburbs of Connecticut, had two kids and settled into life as a full-time mom. Years later, she went into real estate and worked for

Commonwealth Title Insurance in Philadelphia.

Today, she stays active through part-time correspondence work and membership in several organizations in San Rafael, where she's lived for the past 22 years.

It's been years since she did her last caricature, and she has no intentions of doing any more. She's content with where she's been, and where she is now.

"I don't miss it now. I think I've done it. I'm so thankful and so grateful I had the opportunity," Ms. Koelsch said. "I think I did as much as I could in 10 or 12 years."

"I was fortunate to meet the people I did. My eyes were always opened."

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Ms. Koelsch poses with an elephant at one of her many modeling assignments. The entire time, she was scared to death that the elephant would crush her.