

living

WELL

▶ THE SECOND HALF

# Lending her voice

Actress Fran Drescher fights for cancer awareness

BY DEE LONG  
SPECIAL ADVERTISING SECTIONS WRITER

**B**est known to television audiences for creating the lovable yet exasperating character of Fran Fine in “The Nanny,” Fran Drescher has made her distinctive nasal voice as much a signature as Lucille Ball’s red hair or Phyllis Diller’s cackle.

The TV and movie actress from Queens, N.Y., first came to the public’s attention flirting with John Travolta in “Saturday Night Fever” in 1977, but it wasn’t until she and her then-husband (and high school sweetheart) Peter Marc Jacobson pitched “The Nanny” series to CBS in the early ’90s that Drescher became a household name.

Although Drescher has been nominated for, but never won, Golden Globe, Emmy and American Comedy awards, her appeal to entertainment audiences has been multifaceted, not only as a comedian, but also as a director, producer and author of two best-selling books: the autobiographical “Enter Whining” and her life-affirming journey toward wellness, “Cancer Schmancer.”

Although she works in an industry that worships youth, the comedian stared down the milestone of turning 50 last September without blinking an eye. That’s because five years ago Drescher had to face the possibility that she might not have that many birthdays ahead. Diagnosed with uterine cancer after a grueling medical odyssey that included visits to eight different doctors over a two-year period, Drescher then had to have a radical hysterectomy in 2002.

The illness, she said, taught her to focus on living rather than aging.

The woman who brought “The Nanny” into the annals of TV history is now making history of a different sort with her nonprofit advocacy organization, Cancer Schmancer ([www.cancerschmancer.org](http://www.cancerschmancer.org)), named after her book about her medical ordeal. Drescher said she is committed to bringing a revolution to women’s healthcare with better education and quicker treatment for gynecological cancers.

“What most impresses me about Fran is how she’s transformed her own personal suffering and survivorship into creating a national movement focusing on the importance of early detection for ovarian, uterine and

cervical cancers,” said oncologist Dr. Cary Presant, a member of Cancer Schmancer Foundation’s board. “Many celebrities lend their name to a cause, but what’s remarkable about Fran is that she’s built the Cancer Schmancer movement from the ground up, and I admire her for that courage.”

Drescher’s longtime friend Twyla Littleton-Shabtai, who serves as treasurer on the board, said Drescher is a formidable force: “It is an exciting and wild ride working with Fran. She will not take no as an answer. She will not hear that something cannot be done. This attitude is infectious.”

In a recent telephone interview from her Malibu home, Drescher spoke passionately and thoughtfully about Cancer Schmancer and her mission to improve women’s health worldwide.

## HOW DID YOU REACT TO TURNING 50?

It was definitely not traumatic. Every year since the cancer, you have a much better perspective on each year you’re blessed with, and I count my years of wellness with a much greater appreciation. Friends were telling me six months before my 50th, we gotta do this or that, and I told them I’m too busy to do any planning. But I did have two parties in New York, a party in Washington, D.C., and another in Los Angeles.

## HOW HAS YOUR PERSPECTIVE CHANGED SINCE YOUR CANCER DIAGNOSIS?

There have been many silver life lessons out of my cancer survival. I recognize I’m not a superwoman. I walk on the ground among all the other humans. Before cancer, I felt I had to be the caregiver and handle everything. Now I’m much more comfortable receiving.

## YOU SAID IN YOUR BOOK ‘CANCER SCHMANCER,’ ‘MY WHOLE LIFE HAS BEEN ABOUT CHANGING NEGATIVES INTO POSITIVES.’ WHAT DID YOU MEAN BY THAT?

I was a victim of a violent crime in the mid-1980s



Turning 50 “was definitely not traumatic,” says Fran Drescher, who finds that her recovery from cancer helps her to focus on living rather than aging.

PHOTO BY LEO HETZEL

and had to turn that around by setting it straight in my head. I managed to quit smoking, which was very challenging and difficult, but that action became a barometer that if I can do this, I can get through any troubled waters. We all make plans for the future, but no one has a crystal ball. On any given day, you can get sideswiped and your life changes forever. I learned that if a plan stops working, you have to let it go and not get mired in bitterness. You have to play a new hand, and play the hand that’s dealt you. Everything else is in your imagination. I’m definitely living for today because I realize how intangible tomorrow may be.

## DID YOU LOSE YOUR SENSE OF HUMOR WHILE DEALING WITH CANCER?

It took four drafts to strike the funny bone in my book. There was a brief period when I felt very angry and betrayed by my body and the medical community. Even though I’m a woman, I’ll never experience being able to grow a child inside me. But you adapt to life’s lessons — this is the hand you’ve been dealt and what are you going to do?

Please see **FRAN**, Page 3

# Babies and boomers

## Midlife parents see benefits, as well as challenges

BY BARBARA BECKLEY  
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**W**hat do actors Diane Keaton and Warren Beatty have in common with Janet Vandagriff of Glendale and Cassie Johnson of La Cañada?

All are doting midlife parents.

And all are part of a trend that has skyrocketed in recent years. Women 40 and over are the fastest growing segment of mothers having babies, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Figures from the National Center for Health Statistics show the birthrate among women 40 and over — who will be raising young children when they reach the half-century mark — more than doubled between 1990 and 2005. In 2005, 111,517 women in that age group had babies compared to 50,600 women in 1990.

This birthrate trend was the same even when one just looked at women 45 and over — it also more than doubled in those 15 years, according to the center. In

2005, 6,517 women ages 45 to 49 gave birth. And 417 women age 50 and older had babies that year.

So, what’s caused this phenomenon? Have personalities such as Keaton, 59, mother to two children under the age of 10, and Beatty, 70, who became a dad at 54 and now has four kids, encouraged us to delay having children?

No. Older celebrity parents are just a sign of the times, say the experts.

“Blame it on the boomers,” said geriatric specialist Dr. Edward Schneider, dean emeritus of the USC Davis School of Gerontology.

“In the old days, people married in their 20s and had children right away. But the independent baby boomers were very career driven, and now that they’re established, they want families. It’s essentially the same for the celebrities. They’ve got their careers, they’ve got their fans, they’ve got their fortunes — now they want a family,” he added.



Cassie Johnson, 50, of La Cañada, works out daily to remain an active mom for her daughter Kylie, 8. Her other daughter is 17.

PHOTO BY LEO HETZEL

That’s exactly what Vandagriff, 53, did. “I was busy building my film-editing career and didn’t marry until I was 37. Then, with a solid career and marriage, I thought, ‘Why wait?’ So, at 39 I became a mom to Connor [who is now 14].”

Please see **PARENTS**, Page 4

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Inside:

2

It's Your Life  
Coaches prepare people for a happy retirement.

2

Staying Healthy  
Soothing rituals encourage better sleep.

3

Real Estate  
Homes geared for active adults 55 and older.