

CATCHING UP WITH

SANTA BARBARA'S JUDITH McCONNELL

In January, 1993, when SANTA BARBARA played out the final chapters in its nine-year history, Judith McConnell (SOPHIA) found it hard to say goodbye. Although Rosemary Forsyth had played Sophia for the first few months of the show, it was Judith who took over the role and made it distinctly her own. So, other than original cast member Nicolas Coster (LIONEL), Judith was the show's veteran.

She made her daytime debut in the early '70s as GH's AUGUSTA McLEOD, a seductive nurse who tried to split up PETER and DIANNA TAYLOR (Craig Huebing and Brooke Bundy) and eventually killed PHIL BREWER (Martin West). After working on the New York-based soaps AW, ATWT and OLTL, she returned to California as Sophia, a role book-ended by two intriguing murders. Soon after it was revealed that the mysterious bearded Dominic was really the presumed-dead Sophia Capwell, she confessed to accidentally killing her son. She had intended to frighten her ex-lover LIONEL LOCKRIDGE (Nicolas Coster) with what she believed was an unloaded gun, but her husband C.C. (Jed Allan) had loaded the weapon the night before. Then, in the show's final days, Sophia discovered she was being poisoned by ANDIE (Krista Tesreau), who eventually killed Sophia's fiance KEN (Mark McCoy). "I loved both storylines," gloats Judith.

Now, a year after the show ended, Judith talks about its beginning. "It started in July 1984," she recalls. "I had tested for the Augusta part, but that went to Louise (Sorel, now VIVIAN, DAYS). Then they asked if I'd be interested in playing Sophia. I signed on a Tuesday and began taping the following Friday."

Playing the kind-hearted Sophia was often tough for the Pittsburgh-born actress. A former Miss Pennsylvania who graduated from Carnegie Mellon University in the same class as NYPD Blue producer Steven Bochco, Judith had already

created some of soap's most villainous villainesses. "Until Sophia, they were all bitchy and flamboyant," she says. "So it was a challenge to be intrinsically nice all the time to be supportive of my sometimes belligerent husband and messed-up family, yet stay feisty and alive inside."

The work on SANTA BARBARA helped this die-hard New Yorker settle into a West Coast lifestyle. "I'm happy here now," she says. "I love to swim, daydream, luxuriate and spend time with my baby." Mothering her adopted 3-year-old daughter, the beautiful blue-eyed blonde Gwendolyn, is, she says, her greatest role. "I watched her being born," Judith says, and describes the new open adoption process through which she and Gwendolyn were linked. "No one is afraid," she reports serenely. "Everything is taken care of; the birth mother knows the adoptive parents, and everyone is healthy and happy inside."

Besides giving her more time to be with her daughter, Judith's break from daytime has given her the chance to answer fan mail and to go about restoring the home she shares with Gwendolyn. "I've been able to get through drawers of correspondence that had piled up," she says.

But the pleasures of a quiet life haven't stopped Judith from auditioning for juicy parts. She almost landed the role of LAURA HORTON on DAYS (it went instead to Jaime Lyn Bauer), a move that could have reunited her with such former SANTA BARBARA castmates as Louise Sorel,

'Until Sophia, they were all bitchy and flamboyant.'



Thaao Penghlis (ex-MICAH) and Eriq La Salle (ex-KELLY). "I still talk to many SANTA BARBARA actors, and often have lunch with Bridget Dobson (one of the creators)," she tells us.

Trapped in traffic recently, the hapless single Judith spotted a good-looking guy in the car in front of her. "I pulled up next to him to get a better look," she says, "and it was Bert Thaler (ex-PEARL, SANTA BARBARA). We smiled and waved and he may never know what my real intentions were."

Judith may not be on daytime, but she lights up late-night cable TV screens on reruns of Star Trek, The Beverly Hillbillies, Green Acres. "I did a whole slew of shows," she says. Decades later, the actor who played Eb, Tom Lester, showed up in a small part on SANTA BARBARA. "This business is all about ebbs and tides," says Judith, tending no pun. "It's all a great big cycle." The innocent-looking actress quickly turned on her best scheming look. "Maybe Augusta McLeod will return to Port Charles and I'll be a trouble-maker. Wouldn't that be a hoot?"

— Rick

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