

# AARP

The Magazine

World's Largest Circulation Magazine

Do You  
Have What  
It Takes  
To Start  
Your Own  
Business?

## 6 Secrets Of People Who Never Get Sick

Dr. Andrew Weil  
Longevity Tricks  
That Don't Work

Get Stronger  
30-Minute  
Fitness Plan

Debt Relief  
Beware the  
Scammers

Be Happy  
Live Better  
On Less

Go Online to...  
Clip Coupons  
Find Sales  
Save on Gas  
And More!

The Real  
Cold Case  
Cops




Naomi  
Judd Every Day  
Is a Miracle



### **Sitting Pretty**

**After years of struggle, Naomi Judd (relaxing here at her Tennessee home), has a cable talk show, another new book, and a new lease on life.**

HAIR BY MITCH BARRY/BRYAN BANTRY;  
MAKEUP BY SANDY LINTER/BRYAN BANTRY;  
STYLED BY LAURA SOLIN, NYCSTYLIST



By Joe Nick Patoski  
Portrait by Melanie Dunea

# Saved by the Belle

She rose from welfare mom to Nashville queen. No wonder Naomi Judd has so much to tell the world about healing, finding joy, and beating the disease that nearly took her life

**T**he woman in warm-ups by the garbage bin could easily be confused for a hired hand. But the moment she shouts out “May I help you?” to a visitor outside the gate of the Franklin, Tennessee, manse, her face is instantly recognizable.

It’s Naomi Judd, taking out the trash.

Best known as the older half of The Judds, country music’s legendary mother-daughter duo, the petite, porcelain-skinned redhead cuts quite a figure in her cotton stretchies and sheepskin clogs, garbage lid in hand. “I dress for comfort, not to impress,” she chuckles. It’s hard to imagine that this is the same woman who spent a good chunk of her life grappling with single motherhood, domestic abuse, and wrenching poverty—who faced down the potentially fatal hepatitis C virus at 44, and who has been called upon to console her two very famous daughters as they reckon with their very public pain.

Yet at 61 and feeling “sexy,” thank you, Naomi Judd hasn’t missed a step. She went through hell, yes, but she triumphed, took her bows, and kept moving. These days, in fact, Judd moves like a workhorse: as impassioned spokesperson for the

American Liver Foundation, speaking out on behalf of hep C survivors; as host of the Hallmark Channel talk show *Naomi's New Morning*; as motivational guru for those in search of hope and wisdom (and, okay, beautiful skin, too); and as bestselling author of several books, including her latest, *Naomi's Guide to Aging Gratefully* (Simon & Schuster)—her personal testament to the power of maturing with joy, not fear.

It's a far cry from the heady days of the 1980s, when Naomi Judd's life was defined by concert tours, megahits, and red-carpeted walks to amass a collection of awards that includes six Grammys. But by Judd's lights, where she is now is where she was destined to be. Not only that; she's bent on sharing what she's learned along the way—about how to nurture the mind, the spirit, and the body. About how to scale back, find your voice, let go.

And so, within minutes of stepping inside her cozy, if not grand, Craftsman cottage, she's serving up a crash course on her philosophy in a series of rapid bursts: how she's striving to simplify her life; how she's a do-it-yourself kind of woman; how she's learning to value what matters (a \$1,500 purse? "I'm appalled!"); why she refused to accept a "death sentence" from doctors when she was diagnosed with the hepatitis C virus; and how that refusal led her to refine the art of living in the here and now.

And, oh, yes, how much she loves to clean.

"I scrub the toilets," she offers, in a soft, genteel voice that betrays her seventh-generation Appalachian roots. "I wouldn't have it any other way. My favorite thing is doing laundry." She calls this an old habit from when she had nary a credit card nor a savings account to her name.

With electric drills buzzing and hammers pounding (a renovation is under way) and her yapping mixed-breed dogs—Tilly, Teddy Bear, and

Lulu—scurrying at her feet, Judd courses happily through her house. She introduces her husband of 18 years, Larry Strickland, a former backup singer for Elvis Presley, who's typing at the computer—a contraption, Judd notes in passing, she doesn't go near. "Pen and paper work fine for me," she says. E-mail, cell phones, televisions, and typewriters: forget it; she writes her books in longhand.

She takes a minute to brag about her "babies"—Wynonna, the famous singer who has called to say she'll stop by later, and Ashley, the movie star who travels the world advocating for AIDS prevention and women's rights. Judd muses on how their lives

"These personal ground zeroes are what allow us to live," says Judd. "They strip us down, and you have no choice but to get rid of all this extraneous stuff."

have changed. "Most of our lives," she says nostalgically, "it was just the three of us."

But first, lunch. The do-it-yourselfer sets the table and brings out the meal she has prepared: plates of beef tenderloin in a Cabernet gravy, mashed potatoes, peas, and yeast muffins. Before sitting down, she invites me to wash my hands, then asks, "Did you wash long enough to sing the *Happy Birthday* song?"

Once a nurse, always a nurse. Judd earned her nursing degree at 31, but she's the first to say it was an unsettling journey.

Raised by hard-working parents—her dad was a gas station owner; her mom, a homemaker and later a riverboat cook—the

girl born Diana Ellen Judd had her first child, Christina, at 18. She eventually married Michael Ciminella, who took his wife and her daughter to California, where Diana gave birth to a second daughter, Ashley. The couple divorced in 1972, and Diana later began dating another man. When physical abuse crept into the relationship, she filed a restraining order and took her girls back to Kentucky, only to return to California in 1976.

The three lived hand-to-mouth while Diana put herself through nursing school. The days were long. "After school we did homework and laundry at the Wishy-Washy," she recalls. "I'd buy groceries with food stamps, go back to our one-bedroom apartment, and get them fed and put to bed, and then go work as a cocktail waitress until two in the morning. Four hours later I started all over again."

Their threadbare existence brought mother and daughters closer together—



#### A Life's Journey

The famed singer (clockwise from above) with Wynonna in California; ill at home in the early 1990s; restored, with Ashley and Wynonna in New York in 1999.



close enough for Diana to recognize her older daughter's musical gifts.

At 37, Diana quit nursing to embark on a show business career with her older daughter. Christina Ciminella became Wynonna Judd, and Diana became Naomi. The mother-daughter duo became famous for Naomi's sweet and low harmonies, which complemented her daughter's powerful voice. In seven years they built a music empire on the songs "Mama He's Crazy," "Why Not Me?," and 15 other number one country hits, and sold more than 20 million albums and videos.

But stardom came at a price. Wynonna never experienced life as a normal teenager. Ashley attended 13 schools in 12 years, bouncing between her mother, her father, and her grandparents while Mom and Sis rocketed up the charts.

All that changed in 1990, when Naomi was diagnosed with hepatitis C, a liver infection that can lead to cirrhosis, liver failure, or cancer. Her nursing days in ICUs had exposed her to needle sticks and infected blood that can transmit the disease (as can sex). "I'd never been sick for a day in my life," she recalls. Yet "these guys with starched white coats and degrees told me I was going to die. If I had believed them, I'd be dead by now."

Judd first had to reckon with depression, panic attacks, and separation anxiety—all symptoms of the disease—even as she dealt with the shock of ending her career and watching her daughter go solo. "Wynonna had never been away from me a day in her life," she says.

Judd began undergoing extensive interferon treatments, which cause reactions similar to chemotherapy. She also embarked on a quest for answers and alternatives, and that led her to "integrated" treatments, such as biofeedback, aromatherapy, and meditation, that traditional western medicine didn't fully embrace but that, for her, began producing results.

She worked on lowering stress, sought spiritual fulfillment, and ended up discovering an upside to the downturn. "These personal ground zeros are what allow us to live," she says. "They strip us down, and you have no choice but to get rid of all this extraneous stuff."

Judd's hepatitis C went into remission, although she notes that her body will never be completely free of the virus. And she became a fervid crusader for raising awareness of the disease. (She still shocks audiences with estimates that hep C will kill four times as many Americans as AIDS in the next two decades.) Ray Benson, the lead singer of the western swing band Asleep at the Wheel and a hep C sufferer who knew Naomi when she was still Diana, says identifying with the disease was a bold move for a celebrity back then. "She would go on television to talk about it even when no one wanted to hear about it," he says.

Now the country music queen has ratcheted up her work and become a full-fledged crusader for good health all around, conferring with everybody from health guru Andrew Weil, M.D., who calls her an "influential advocate" in the area of integrative medicine, to poet Maya Angelou, to Francis Collins, M.D., Ph.D., the scientist credited for helping decipher the human genome. Using every forum she has—her cable talk show, her lectures, and books—she sings the praises of the spirit-body-mind connec-



#### Talking Cure

The singer-turned-guru (clockwise from left) at a signing for her recent book; on the set of her cable show, *Naomi's New Morning*; speaking at a hepatitis C symposium in New York City.



tion, rails against the lack of health care coverage for millions of uninsured Americans ("That's immoral in my way of thinking"), and extols the virtues of good mental health, particularly among women, who she says are paralyzed by "the disease to please."

Her latest attack is on society's fears about aging, and so Judd has culled from her life experience simple advice she says she's found invaluable in her own quest to embrace the joy as she grows old: Be optimistic. Feel good about wisdom gained. Be grateful (because you'll want for less). Stay close to the ones you love. Heal wounds. Let go.

It is the latter bits of advice that resonate most dramatically midway through lunch, when Wynonna, who lives on adjacent farm property, walks through the back door and pulls up a seat at the table. (Ashley had only recently been there, too; she lives up the road when she isn't in Scotland, the homeland of her husband, racecar driver Dario Franchitti.)

After hugs all around and lots of chitchat, Wy praises her mom as a survivor but ribs her for having been too much the perfectionist, too invincible. "The message Naomi Judd sent me is, 'I'm strong, I can do it myself, I don't need any help,'" she says.

Wynonna recalls her stay at Shades of Hope, a rehabilitation facility in Buffalo Gap, Texas, where she was treated last year for an eating disorder. "I wrote a letter about what it was like to be Naomi Judd's daughter," she says. "I wrote, 'Dear Mom, being your daughter has been the greatest blessing in my life and at times the greatest burden.'" It was not easy, she explains, growing up on stage with Mom as partner and closest friend.

Wy's stay at Shades of Hope was followed by a stay at the same place by Ashley, who has said she checked in to deal with depression, isolation, and codependent relationships, and a compulsion for cleaning. "Supposedly, my sister was the 'messed up' one, and I was the 'perfect' one," Ashley told *Glamour* magazine in 2006. Seeing what Shades of Hope did for Wy, she says, inspired her to take the same steps.

Naomi readily acknowledges it hasn't all been all light and happiness in the Judd world. Life can get dark and messy. And, yes, she's made some mistakes as (continued on page 104)

# Naomi Judd

(continued from page 63)

a mom. But she holds firm that you gotta move on. As she writes in her latest book, "That was then. This is now." To age "gratefully," she says, you must let go of your fantasy of who you ought to be and just try to be better.

And so the women, for all their angst, stay close, and they do work at getting better. Larry Strickland, whom the daughters call Pop, concedes the intensity of this work can be something to navigate. "Sometimes a poor old country boy like me can get lost in Juddville," he says, cheerfully. "All three of the women are strong, emotional, tell-it-like-it-is individuals."

But love abounds, he says, and the women are fastidiously refining their communication skills. Mother and daughters are trying to speak more intimately at home. They exchange compliments, reveal epiphanies—Ashley (via e-mail) describes her mom as a "healer," a woman who "cares deeply about leaving a positive mark in the world." Naomi calls Ashley her "sweet pea." Wy says she now knows her mom is vulnerable. Naomi says this is true.

And on it goes, this work in progress called family. "The good news is, I raised two very creative, strong-willed, expressive, passionate women," Naomi says, smiling. "The bad news is, I raised two very creative, strong-willed, expressive, passionate women."

But she would have it no other way. Which is why, after an afternoon of chatter about days that were difficult and days spectacularly grand, Naomi shoots a glance across the table and throws down a challenge to Wy. In that instant, one sees a remnant, perhaps, of an earlier time—before there were Grammys, mansions, talk shows, when all Naomi Judd and her daughters had was one another.

Says Naomi, "Finish this sentence: 'Judd women always...'"

"...land on their feet," Wynonna replies. ■

---

*Joe Nick Patoski is writing a biography of Willie Nelson, to be published by Little, Brown, in 2008.*