



Golden Triangle Godiva

'Belle of Beaumont' returns home to share secrets of beauty

text by CHERYL ROSE

Once upon a time, Debra Jo Fondren's golden tresses flowed down to her knees. She was a natural "girl-next-door" beauty. When she left her sleepy hometown of Lumberton on an adventure, a twist of fate led her to an enchanting life of fortune and fame. For a time, like Rapunzel, she was a princess of the world.

Then life got tangled.

Tress to Success

In 1976, 21-year-old Fondren was working as a waitress in Beaumont when she took a vacation to Las Vegas. She was approached by a contributing photographer for Playboy magazine to pose for him. "His girlfriend gave me his business >>



card and I shot with him the next day," Fondren said. She was familiar with the magazine and didn't hesitate to take the opportunity. "I said, 'Why not?' I didn't give it any thought."

Though Fondren had monthly photo sessions with photographer Robert Hooper, her picture didn't appear in the magazine for almost a year. Meanwhile, she continued to work as a waitress and married her boyfriend.

Fondren officially became a Playmate as Miss September 1977, styled as "The Belle of Beaumont." She was later selected as Playboy's 1978 Playmate of the Year.

The Bright Lights

During her first public promotion as a Playmate at a Houston car show, Fondren said she was stunned to see hundreds of fans lined up for her autograph. "The first time I received fan mail, it was a gigantic box, like you'd put furniture in," she said. (Though the quantity has decreased over the years, Fondren said she gets fan mail to this day.)

When she became Playmate of the Year, she embarked on a promotional world tour. "I traveled all over the world first class — limos, roses, tons and tons of roses, all sorts of media/TV/newspaper interviews, meeting celebrities. I've gone everywhere I wanted to go. Not only did I have fun and gain a degree of sophistication, I made a lot of money — wish I had some of that now."

Knots and De-tangling

But fame and its after effects extorted a price. Her family disowned Fondren for a year with no communication. Though her family relationships were repaired, her first marriage lasted only



nine months. Still Fondren, who is single, says that she's "been married fewer times than Liz Taylor." Marriage, money and addiction troubles followed her Playmate celebrity and took years for her to master.

Fondren experimented with a number of careers, including acting. She has some credits for guest spots on TV shows and a few movies. However, she realized early on that though she could adequately deliver a line, she was not true actress material. She found that she preferred

working behind the camera, doing a variety of jobs including casting talent.

Later, Fondren trained and worked as a post-surgical care specialist for some of the most in-demand Beverly Hills plastic surgeons, a job she found very satisfying. For eight years, she helped patients recover from surgery. Fondren believes she would still be happily working in this role if the recession hadn't curtailed expensive elective surgeries. Around 2007, the work slowed down. "In the end, L.A. is a very expensive town to live in," she said. Fondren decided to return home to Texas.

Smooth and Styled

The transition was initially difficult for Fondren, who left friends and a familiar lifestyle when she moved from Los Angeles in 2008. She attended the Southeast Texas Career Institute in Silsbee to gain her license as an esthetician, and she worked briefly at a medical spa in Pasadena. In February, Fondren joined the faculty of her former school as an esthetics instructor, training students to provide cosmetic beauty treatments.

She is thrilled with her new role. "I didn't know this was meant for me, but I took to it like a fish to water," she said. "I love what I do. I love encouraging young girls."

Fondren's pride in the school and the program is obvious. She raves about the campus and the new laser-tech program the school will be offering. Looking back, she views the decision to move home to Texas in a new light. "With the love I have for what I'm doing now, it was a blessing in disguise," she said.

Near her family, with her pet birds and cats and a job she is relishing, Fondren is content. "I'm not ashamed of my past," she said. "I had to work very hard, and I found things that I loved to do." **VIP**

Teaching beauty

Estheticians perform cosmetic skin treatments such as facials, waxing, chemical peels and microdermabrasion. They work in salons, day and destination spas, skin care centers and medical offices. Fondren's students at Southeast Texas Career Institute offer a variety of esthetic services to the public as part of their training. Prices range from \$5-\$35 with special pricing for seniors. To inquire, call 409.386.2020.



Playmates then and now

Fondren posed for Playboy in what is considered by critics to be the heyday of the magazine. The magazine was then at its height for circulation and profit.

"I consider it to be the funnest time in Playboy history and so does Hef," Fondren said, referring to Hugh Hefner, Playboy's founder, editor-in-chief and chief creative director. "Who doesn't love the disco era?"

Fondren noted that later in the 1980s and 1990s, movie stars and celebrities wanted to be on the Playboy cover to promote their careers. Playmates now go on to television or movies relatively easily. "In my day, it was still a naughty little thing to do," Fondren said. "It would be difficult to cross over into the motion picture industry because they wouldn't take you seriously."

But today, Playboy's circulation has dropped substantially. Video, internet and television have taken their toll on all magazine subscriptions, however, Fondren agrees with critics

that cite the static quality of the magazine as a reason for its decline. "It's not as interesting a magazine," she said. "The girls now look somewhat the same to me. We were all chosen because we were so totally different from each other. It doesn't look like a lot of effort is being put into it."

Over 58 years, the Playmates have also changed. Fondren said in the '70s they were looking for new and fresh models. They did background checks and wouldn't have used a model who had worked as an exotic dancer, for example. Also in that era, most models were natural, whereas almost all recent models have a variety of augmentation and surgical enhancement, Fondren noted. As a sign of the times, Fondren said that the first thing she did with her first Playmate check was to get breast augmentation surgery, a decision that caused trouble with Playboy.

The money has increased over time as well. Fondren received \$10,000 as a Playmate in 1977. In 2006, the reported pay was \$25,000.



The hair

Fondren's trademark throughout her modeling career and what caught the eye of Playboy was her knee-length blond hair. Yes, it was real, and Fondren said people frequently tugged it to be sure.

Fondren's mother was a hairdresser who often used her daughter to experiment with haircuts. At age 12, Fondren begged her mother to let it grow. By the time she was 22, it was 58 inches long. She said some of the other models teased her about looking like Cousin It from *The Addams Family*. The extra long hair did force her to have upright posture, she said.

She didn't cut it by choice. By 1988, her hair reached her ankles. She had always colored it blond. (Though blond as a child, her hair darkened in adolescence). She decided to experiment with becoming a redhead. The dye damaged her hair so badly it had to be cut, an emotional and traumatic day for Fondren.