



want photo with
Talina walking...



FIRST WORDS HERE TK never worry about curb appeal, because I know I can change the curb,” says Mary Ellen Trainor Zemeckis as she surveys the soaring living room ceiling of her Montecito home. A mere 10 months under construction, the exquisitely appointed historic 1923 adobe residence bears no obvious signs of the complete overhaul it recently received.

This is no accident; Mary Ellen has rebuilt and furnished three homes in Montecito (plus two in Summerland) since she traded Hollywood for Santa Barbara in 1991. It’s a talent that emerged early, when she accepted her first paying job—babysitting, at age 12: “After I would put all the kids to bed, the first thing that I would then start to do was rearrange all the furniture.” But Mary Ellen’s journey from watching the neighbors’ kids to overseeing her own home renovation projects has more twists and turns than an action adventure film such as *Romancing the Stone*, which, as it happens, was her big-screen acting debut.

Originally from the San Francisco Bay area, as a high school graduate, Mary Ellen experienced politics firsthand working for the board of supervisors when political heavyweights George Moscone and Leo J. Ryan were on the scene. Determined to major in journalism, she headed south for college (San Diego State University) where a class field trip landed her a position as the “morning drive editor” for a San Diego radio

station. She became adept at juggling work and school. “I went to school at 11:00 in the morning until 3:00. I got home at 3:30. I studied and did my homework until 5:00. I went to bed at 5:00 and got up at midnight. My shift started at 1:00 in the morning. So I worked until 10:00 and then I went to school,” she says. Her efforts paid off; she was quickly hired as a writer for CBS news—after turning down the network’s offer to become an on-air news personality.

The next stop was Hollywood, and, according to Mary Ellen, what occurred then was “a progression of lucky breaks.” One particularly auspicious break was being hired to work for two talented young film directors: John Milius and Steven Spielberg. “I would clean their shotguns, wash their cars, pick up their dry cleaning, and edit their scripts,” she says with a laugh. She also decorated their studio offices, spending only one-third of the amount allocated by the studio. (She returned the rest.) Working 16-hour days, the job was a crash course in moviemaking, and before long, she was tapped for an executive position. It was a watershed moment, she recalls, as she “went from my jeans and my flip-flops and washing cars to my parking space, a BMW, and a suit.”

Mary Ellen would probably be running a movie studio today if actor Michael Douglas hadn’t suggested—over dinner—that she play the sister of Kathleen Turner’s character in *Romancing the Stone*. She went on to roles in

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blockbusters such as *The Goonies*, *Back to the Future*, *Lethal Weapon*, *Die Hard*, *Death Becomes Her*, and *Forrest Gump* (to name just a few).

But as much as Mary Ellen relished her Hollywood existence, she sensed that moving north to Santa Barbara would provide her young son, Alex, with a healthier childhood environment. Her instincts were correct. Alex, now 24, works as a counseling liaison between parents, physicians, educational consultants, and sober environments for young people emerging from primary care for addiction.

Moving to Montecito also provided Mary Ellen with the opportunity to pursue her refurbishing skills. Given her background, it's hardly surprising she approaches each home renovation project as if she were directing a motion picture: "There's the script, which is the set of plans, and then you're shooting, you're editing, you embellish, and then it's a wrap." Literally. With Mary Ellen in charge, the moving van pulls up within days after the construction crew departs. Her secret? She acquires the contents during construction. "I buy all the way along, so that when the house is structurally done, it is one big *whoosh*," she says, gesturing like an orchestra conductor at the finale of a symphony.

In keeping with the adobe's historic style, much of the carved wood furniture was acquired in the Mexican

town of San Miguel de Allende, which is known for its Spanish colonial architecture. Other signature items were purchased locally from the Summerland Antique Collective. But Mary Ellen never packs a tape measure, relying on her innate sense of space and proportion. Even so, she concedes that "on the day the crates came and they were unloaded into the courtyard, I started to shake, thinking, *Holy smoke, what if...?*" (No surprise—everything fit perfectly.)

To help her realize her big-picture vision, Mary Ellen gathered a team of primarily local professionals: architect Christopher P. Dentzel ("particularly adept at compromise and working with the city to accomplish clients' desires"); general contractor Anselmo Donate of A.D. Construction ("works tirelessly to complete on time a beautifully constructed home"); expert cabinetmaker Gigi Ronchietto ("an extremely gifted craftsman with a wicked sense of humor"); decorative light fixture guru Steven Handelman ("I have worked with Steve on every house"); decorative paint master Peter Bolton ("a specialty painter of great vision"); and wrought iron master Manuel Moreno ("I could sketch on a napkin and it would come as an exact replica").

Hollywood films portray imaginary settings that look real; Mary Ellen creates real settings that could easily appear in films. In her living room, the most dramatic public space, the furniture emits a soft glow as if lit from



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