



Pacific Grove's Model Citizen

BY JULIE ENGELHARDT PHOTOGRAPHY BY HECTOR HERRERA



Natasha Chalenko has lived the kind of life many people just dream about. She has worked as a runway fashion model, plus she has appeared in magazines, catalogs and in ad campaigns. Her modeling career has enabled her to travel the world, visiting exotic locales in Europe and Asia, meeting different people and experiencing unique cultures. Chalenko now lives in one of the most exciting cities in the world, San Francisco, and she has ties with the Monterey Peninsula through her business located in Pacific Grove. Although she has had the opportunity to travel around the globe, her life today is a far cry from how it first began.

“I remember a lot of snow and the Northern Lights, which were amazing. [Russia is] very cold, but very magical.”

Chalenko was born in the northeastern part of Russian Siberia in what is known as the Magadan Region, an area where temperatures often drop to 70-degrees below zero. Living there, Chalenko says, can truly take its toll on the human body.

Her parents moved to the Magadan Region in order to conduct research in an area known as the Circle of Gold, where hundreds of gold mines are located. Her father was the head of geological research and expeditions, and her mother, who has a degree in chemistry, worked as a teacher. Chalenko says that her parents felt it was necessary to relocate to the area because that is where the country needed them the most. “Not many people wanted to go to the North and work there,” she recalls.

Although she was young child, Chalenko still has a few memories of living in an area where the climate is so very severe. “I remember a lot of snow and the Northern Lights, which were amazing. It’s very cold, but very magical,” she says. “I remember really great people because we were surrounded by geologists and other researchers. They would have wonderful attitudes and they were always happy. They would have this sparkle and no one ever complained.”

Chalenko says that growing up in the North helped her, and her family, learn how to work hard and be self-reliant. “The North does not accept the weak,” she explains. “You have to be a leader there. You have to count on yourself and be very independent. My parents dedicated a lot of years to this harsh region.”

When she was five, Chalenko and her family moved to the Ukraine, where she says the climate was,

thankfully, much, much warmer. But her parents always carried a ‘northern attitude,’ in everything they did, she comments. “From the time I was very little they told me I had to have a ‘can do’ attitude and always accept the challenge,”

Chalenko spent her childhood and teen years in the Ukraine where she attended school. Education was an important factor in her life, and her parents expected her to do well in her classes. Yet an interesting turn of events happened when she was about 16 and was introduced to the world of modeling. This was during the late 1980’s-early ‘90’s when the Iron Curtain fell, and western influences were making their way into Eastern Europe. “There were a lot of opportunities that definitely opened that didn’t exist before, because we lived in a very closed environment,” she recalls. In the beginning, Chalenko treated modeling as a hobby, working primarily during school holidays and vacations.

Chalenko went on to study medicine at the Donetsk National University and graduated with her degree but always felt that modeling was her true calling. “I realized that it was something I loved to do; it was very empowering for me. In fact, I was one of the first Ukrainian models and one of the first to get in on the international level,” she says. Although she enjoyed modeling, Chalenko decided to take her career a step further and began focusing on working behind the scenes. “It gave me a different perspective — helping models develop into professionals.”

After years of traveling, Chalenko settled in San Francisco. She says she loves the city and its diversity — from nightlife to cultural events to the

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But after Herculean efforts, the hotel officially opened in May. “It’s been the most complex and involved project I’ve ever had,” Chen commented. What exists now is an understated facade, compatible with the historical feel of Cannery’s Row, but with a modern sensibility to the interiors. Though HKS was hamstrung by the exterior expression, the interior look and feel had flexibility. The modernist Asian-inspired interior belies the pragmatic exterior. “Inside the building Mr. Chen elected to go with a more contemporary expression. Given the constraints, we tried to use as many contemporary materials and details as possible so that the building is more evocative than literal,” Hill stated. Hardscapes like tiles and wood are blended with woven fabric and inset rugs to create a dynamic play of materials and surfaces. Every guest room has its own orchids, a detail that Chen insisted on.

The hotel offers 110 rooms on the bayside and another 98 on the inland side.

C Restaurant + Bar boasts tantalizing food and unparalleled views of the bay. The hotel offers two ballrooms, meeting space, a full service spa, a Kids Club and a 350-car garage.

The hotel plans on employing close to 250 staff during peak periods.

Balestreri sees the completion of the hotel in romantic terms. He credits the Greeks and their Athenaeum form of government, or area

of influence. “When everyone started to work together, things happened for the best. But when they don’t, you get 28 years of everything being paralyzed,” he said. The nearly four million visitors who descend upon Cannery Row each year, and local residents as well, will undoubtedly be pleased that the eyesore is gone and that the 700 block fits snugly into one of America’s finest historical sites. ◦

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variety of restaurants and cuisine. But her new life in the United States also offered her a chance to do more with her career. She decided to shift from managing models to educating young people about the industry. “I realized that modeling and acting are definitely the ultimate goal, but it all starts with education,” she said.

She began working with John Robert Powers Acting and Modeling School in order to reach out to aspiring models and actors. “John Robert Powers is a school system and a training facility to get basic skills about the industry, but we teach personal development and life skills,” she said. Chalenko is now the CEO for the Central Coast region, which spans from San Luis Obispo county up to San Mateo County and over to Fresno and Merced. Her husband, Edward D. Schmidt, has been a great inspiration to Chalenko in helping her attain many of her goals. “He has been a great supporter of what I do and with my career.”

John Robert Powers opened its newest location in Pacific Grove this past July. Chalenko says one of her main objectives is to work with the local population and visit area schools. “We do have a community outreach program that we offer to the high schools,” she says. “We offer motivational speakers for lectures and career days, but we never talk about modeling and acting. We talk to them about their future and what it will be like when they’re out of school.” She says they receive wonderful letters from school educators who are impressed with the speakers and the messages they bring to the students. “We talk about having confidence, self esteem, self awareness, interview skills, presentation skills, and public speaking. They can use these skills from day one, and for the rest of their lives. These are skills that can be used anywhere, from the classroom to the board room.”

Chalenko’s vision for the future is to expand speaking engagements at schools throughout the Monterey Peninsula, sharing the message that through hard work and determination, goals and aspirations can be more than just distant dreams; they are within reach. ◦

FEATURE EDITORIAL CREDITS:

Photography: Hector Herrera
hectorherrera.com

Stylist: Ruth Snow

Make-up & Hair: Soni Marron Uribe / artistuntied.com

Location: John Robert Powers Studios, Pacific Grove
150 Country Club Gate Center, Pacific Grove, CA 93950

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