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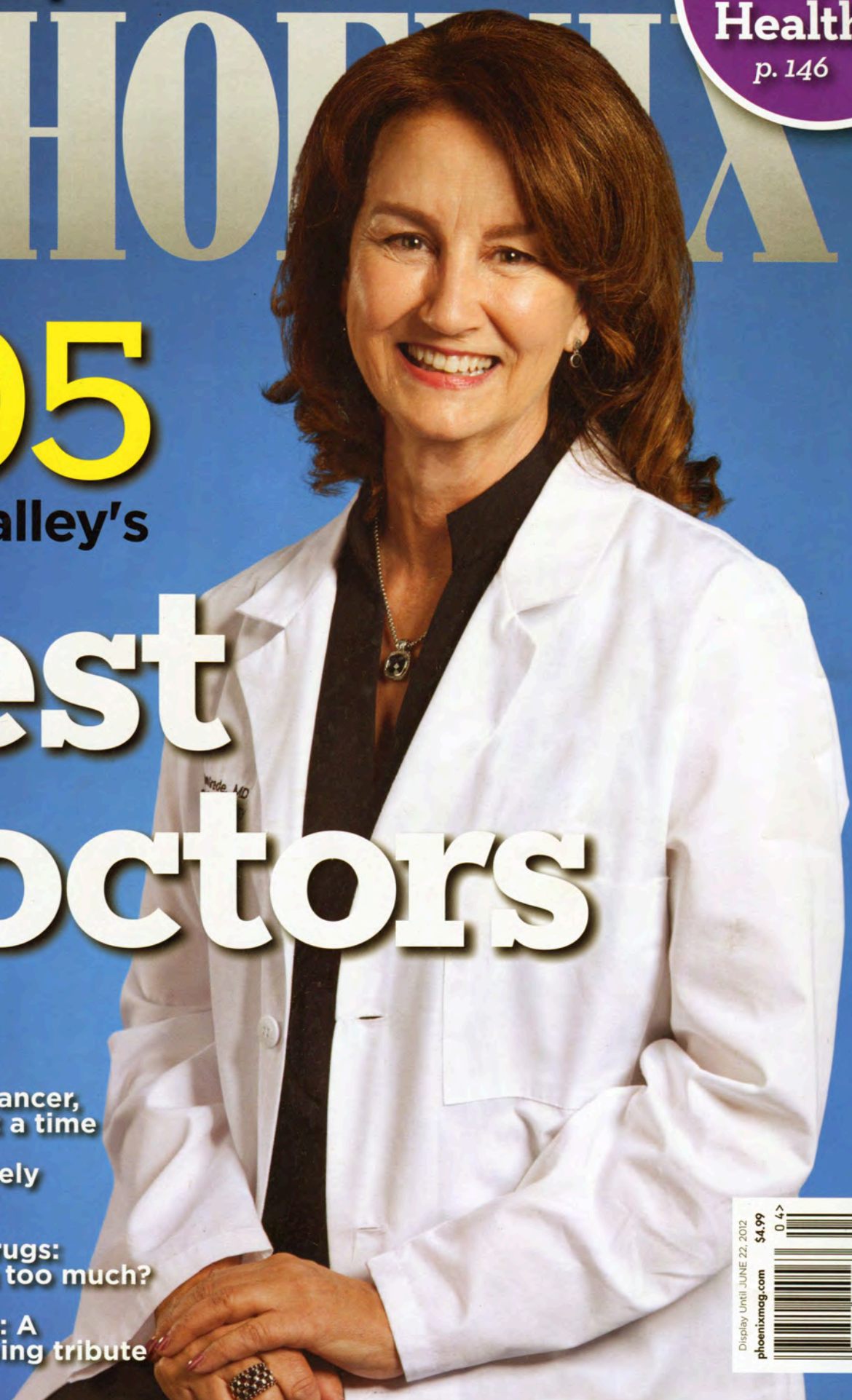
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Up Close and Personal with...

Tara Hitchcock

FREE AGENT TV PERSONALITY

BY CRAIG OUTHIER
ILLUSTRATION BY
PATRICK MCQUADE

LIFE IS WHAT HAPPENS when you're making other plans, they say. For former *Good Morning Arizona* ringmaster Tara Hitchcock, it's also what happens when you're enjoying an extended five-month sabbatical.

Long one of the Valley's most popular and recognizable TV faces, Hitchcock was treating herself to a well-earned severance of international trips and quality-time family retreats after her 15-year run at KTVK-3TV ended last fall. She visited London and Mexico City, took her stepchildren to Guatemala, and took up kiteboarding. Then the good times abruptly ground to a halt one day in late January, when 16-year-old stepson Dylan Francis suffered a crushing headache while playing capture-the-flag with classmates. When the left side of his body went numb and he began vomiting, Dylan was Medivac'd to St. Joe's Hospital in Phoenix, where physicians determined the teen had suffered a brain hemorrhage. The cause: an abnormality called cerebral arteriovenous malformation (AVM) in which the brain's arteries and veins are inadequately connected. Dylan was likely born with it.

A month after the episode, Dylan's prognosis was good, and Hitchcock had a new appreciation for the medical professionals she often met while MC'ing fundraisers like *Celebrity Fight Night*. "He still can't walk without assistance, but cognitively he's doing great, and we're blessed that he can speak," Hitchcock said between shifts at the teen's bedside. "And we're blessed that he's had such good medical care. Three weeks [before the accident], we were in Guatemala. I don't even want to think about that."

With her stepson on the mend, the pride of Plano, Texas was ready to contemplate her TV future - and past - with a fresh perspective.



NO HARD FEELINGS

Hitchcock says she misses the "glory years and craziness" of *Good Morning Arizona* during the show's top-rated run in the late '90s and early '00s, but concedes that her yen for "sports, entertainment and travel" and the more staid, news-oriented focus adopted by the station in 2007 was an "imperfect match."

"I'm grateful. Who gets to keep a job for 15 years anymore?" she asks, adding that her departure came by "mutual agreement."

BY GEORGE

Known as a sharp and convivial interviewer, Hitchcock says one of her thousands of chats stands out as her favorite: "George Clooney is my all-time fave, hands down. For starters, he's great to look at. And even if it's his 40th interview of the day, he makes you feel like you're asking the best questions he's ever heard. Now that's a man."

HAVE MIC, WILL TRAVEL

Hitchcock caught the travel bug while working movie junkets for 3TV and spent

much of her sabbatical globetrotting. Two more trips she hopes to knock out soon:

> **Poland:** Later this year, Hitchcock and her three sisters will accompany their mother to her ancestral homeland. "She's 100 percent Polish, so it's a big deal," says Hitchcock of her mother. "But she's smoked every day of her life, so I don't know how she's gonna keep up with us."

> **Brazil:** Husband Ken has kiteboarded the coast near Fortaleza, and Hitchcock wants to follow suit. "You basically go on these 10-day excursions where guys follow you down the coast with your gear."

THE TARA SHOW?

This summer, Hitchcock will shoot a pilot with an L.A.-based producer who envisions a nationally-syndicated talk show. "What I've learned from the experience at 3TV, and the experience with Dylan, is that life is short and you better do what you love," she says. "So I just want to do something that lets me utilize my skills. I'm not Oprah, but I've got some skills."