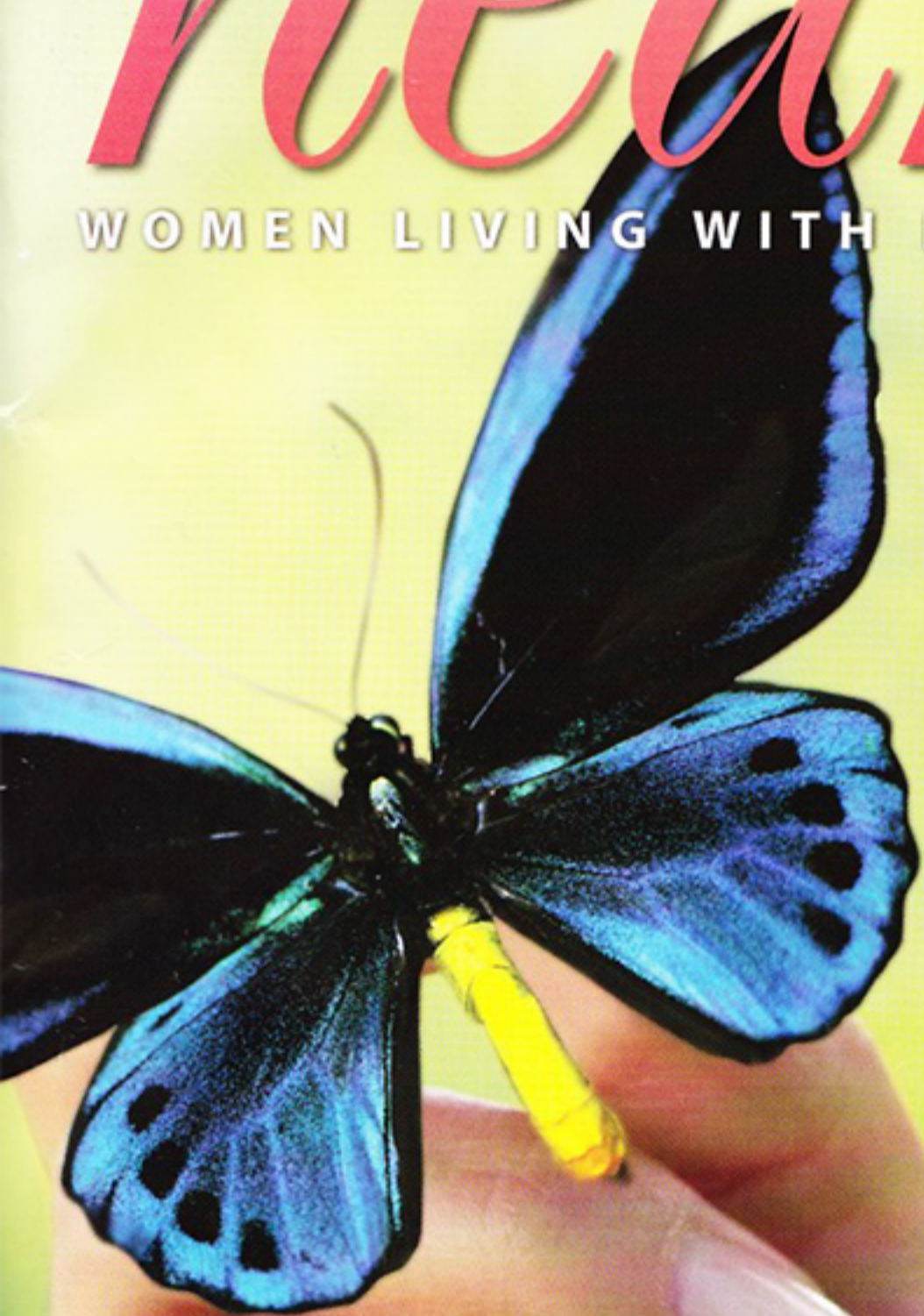


fall 2006

# heart

WOMEN LIVING WITH PASSION



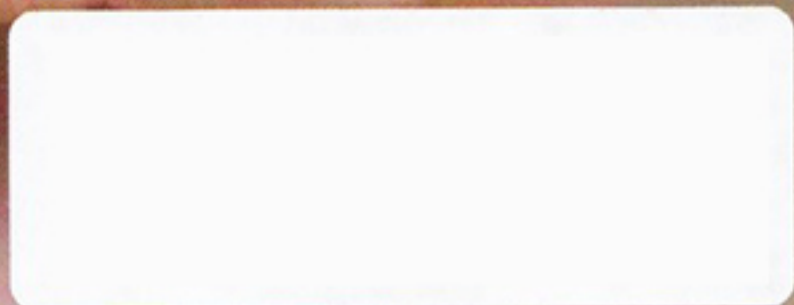
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WOMEN TO WATCH

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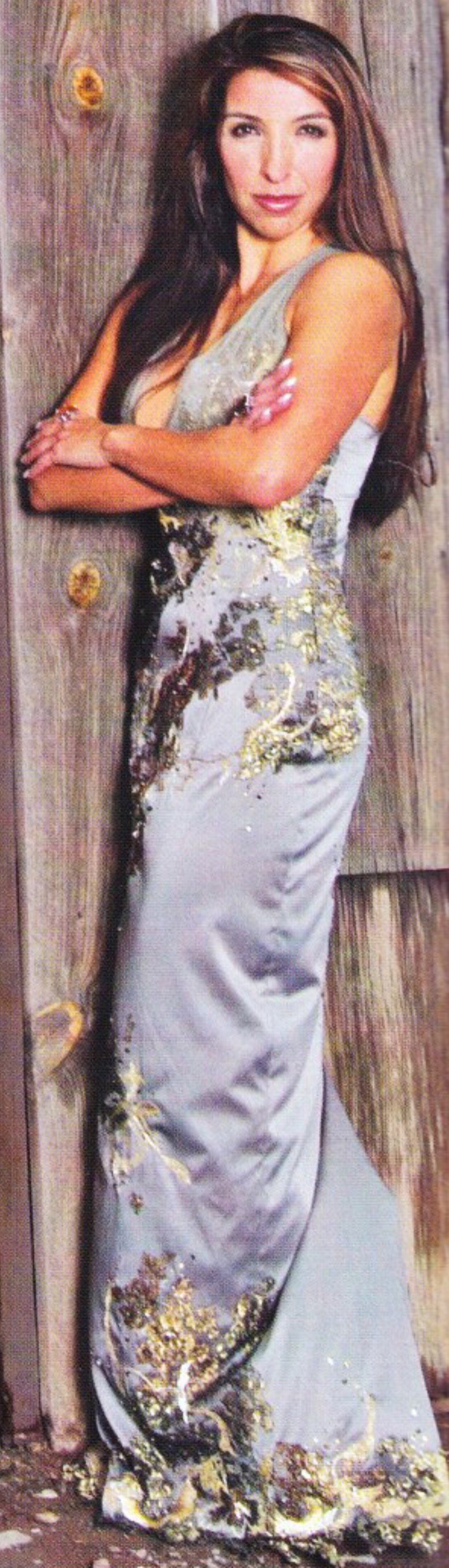
{Women to Watch}

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“NOTHING SPLENDID  
HAS EVER BEEN ACHIEVED  
EXCEPT BY THOSE WHO  
DARED BELIEVE THAT  
SOMETHING INSIDE  
THEM WAS SUPERIOR  
TO CIRCUMSTANCES.”

- Bruce Barton

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**U**nder the New Mexico sun little girls grow every day, learning joy and disappointment, love and desire, frustration and success. They all face the choices each woman must make: Who will I be? What do I want? Where am I going, and will I lead or follow? Life's path isn't easy for anyone, but some live their whole lives with an innate determination that rejects the idea of a predetermined course and screams out, "I will choose my own destiny."

## *desert blossom:* A LIFE MADE FROM FAMILY, FAITH AND FRIENDS

By Bob Skolnick & Barbara Morales \* Photography by Carolyn Bowman

Born in Las Cruces, and raised in the Truth or Consequences / Winston area, Denise Torres spent most of her time on her grandparents' Sierra County ranch. Her parents' divorce left her mother working two jobs, "As a result I got to spend a lot of time with my grandparents, which I came to realize was a very good thing. I didn't realize how fortunate I was at the time." This time with them helped shape her strong ideals and values. Early on, Denise was exposed to a way of life she deeply respected, but did not want to live.

"My grandparents were traditional Hispanics who ranched and farmed. My grandfather was a well-respected rancher and supporter of the community. He was my larger than life adult role model of hard work, respect and honesty as the way to live your life. My grandma's place was taking care of her husband and her children with no room for herself." Her grandmother, however, assured her that although this was the life she had chosen for herself, Denise was free to pursue an education and to do whatever inspired her.

Horses and riding were an everyday part of ranch life. Denise's spirit always soared when she was out riding on her horse, her friend, "Whammie Chick" who she knew did not care about economic or cultural differences, just friendship and love. Although her father worked a lot when she was young and she saw him very little she credits him with helping her reach the National Rodeo Finals. Meeting her at the arena everyday, he coached her for hours. He always told her, "It is not the color of the horse; it is the heart inside him." She also credits her father for her nickname, "Moose." He thought she was the ugliest newborn he had ever seen. The nickname, though well-meant, struck a cord with Denise and left her feeling very much the ugly duckling, but such things drive Denise's need to succeed.

At the age of seven, Denise lived in a home where snow drifted in on each side of the front door in the wintertime. She was determined to rise up through hard work and education and it was then that she decided that she wanted to become an attorney. Beginning in middle school working part-time at a grocery store she earned money to help pay for her school clothes. The drive to be successful translated in her early school years to participating in student counsel, cheerleading, rodeo club, and honors society. All of her hard work paid off in the form of a Presidential Scholarship to the University of New Mexico for her undergraduate degree in Business, and then a National Hispanic Scholarship to attend the University of New Mexico School of Law.

Though supportive and loving, Denise's family was unable to prepare her for the shock of higher academic life and a large city. "I was terrified going to college. My first semester I called my mom everyday, lonely and crying. My mom would say that I could come home and check groceries again, and I'd say, 'Alright, I am going to go study now, Mom.'" Her goal was always law school so she existed on a lot of work and very little play.

Sorrow has always brought Denise closer to a greater love for those around her. When her stepmother was dying of cancer, her father chose to take care of her at home rather than placing her in assisted care or hospice. "Every day he bathed her and changed her. Some of the other family members would not see her; they chose not to accept her death. This changed my whole perspective on people and kindness. You have to expect to be miserable and mourn and then you will make it through. Before that time in my life, I had no idea what cancer sufferers, family of cancer patients, went through."

For over twenty years Denise has endured the pain of a very close family member's mental illness and alcohol addiction and the

*I rise and fall with my clients. If we win I feel worthy of them, and if we fail I feel like I've failed them forever.*



resulting suffering of the whole family. Seeing a loved one moving in and out of institutions and struggling with addictions inspired Denise to take cases representing patients abused in mental health clinics. Despite her passion for justice, she does not allow herself to take many of these cases. "They are too emotional for me," she states. "I will be a strong woman all day but when I get home I sit in the middle of my living room floor and cry."

These painful family experiences strengthened her resolve and helped her to make decisions about how she was going to live her life. Denise decided long ago that the traditional conventions of marriage and children were not for her. She chose not to marry.


"Usually what I get is, 'What is wrong with you? You've never been married! You've never had kids!' Now I don't take offense to it anymore. It isn't that I haven't had opportunities to get married. I've been very blessed to have wonderful men in my life with which I have had loving, caring relationships. Marriage was just not what I was looking for."

The time she might have put into a more traditional mother/wife role has gone into helping hundreds of people through her 13-year law practice. "Some of my family and friends ask why I put myself through the long hours and the stress of representing and attaching to people who need help, but if I have to explain they wouldn't understand. When a client gives me their case and it is time to pursue it, I give everything I have to that person. I rise and fall with my clients. If we win I feel worthy of them, and if we fail I feel like I've failed them forever. I don't have another chance; it's a big deal to me."

Denise is a partner in the personal injury law firm of Saenz & Torres, P.A., and she has been selected by her peers to be included in the 2005-2006 and 2006-2007 editions of the Best Lawyers in America. She serves on the Board of the New Mexico Trial Lawyers Association and helps draft jury instructions for New Mexico jurors who sit on civil cases. After practicing law for so long, Denise is very proud of the fact that she loves what she does. "I'm so lucky, because there are lawyers that hate what they do. They go into the law for the wrong reasons and continue to practice for the wrong reasons."


Denise's hard work early on has allowed her the luxury of being able to take time now to play a little bit. How does she unwind? She races cars. When asked about her unusual hobby, her need for speed, Denise laughs. "I think in the

**Angels via Michael**

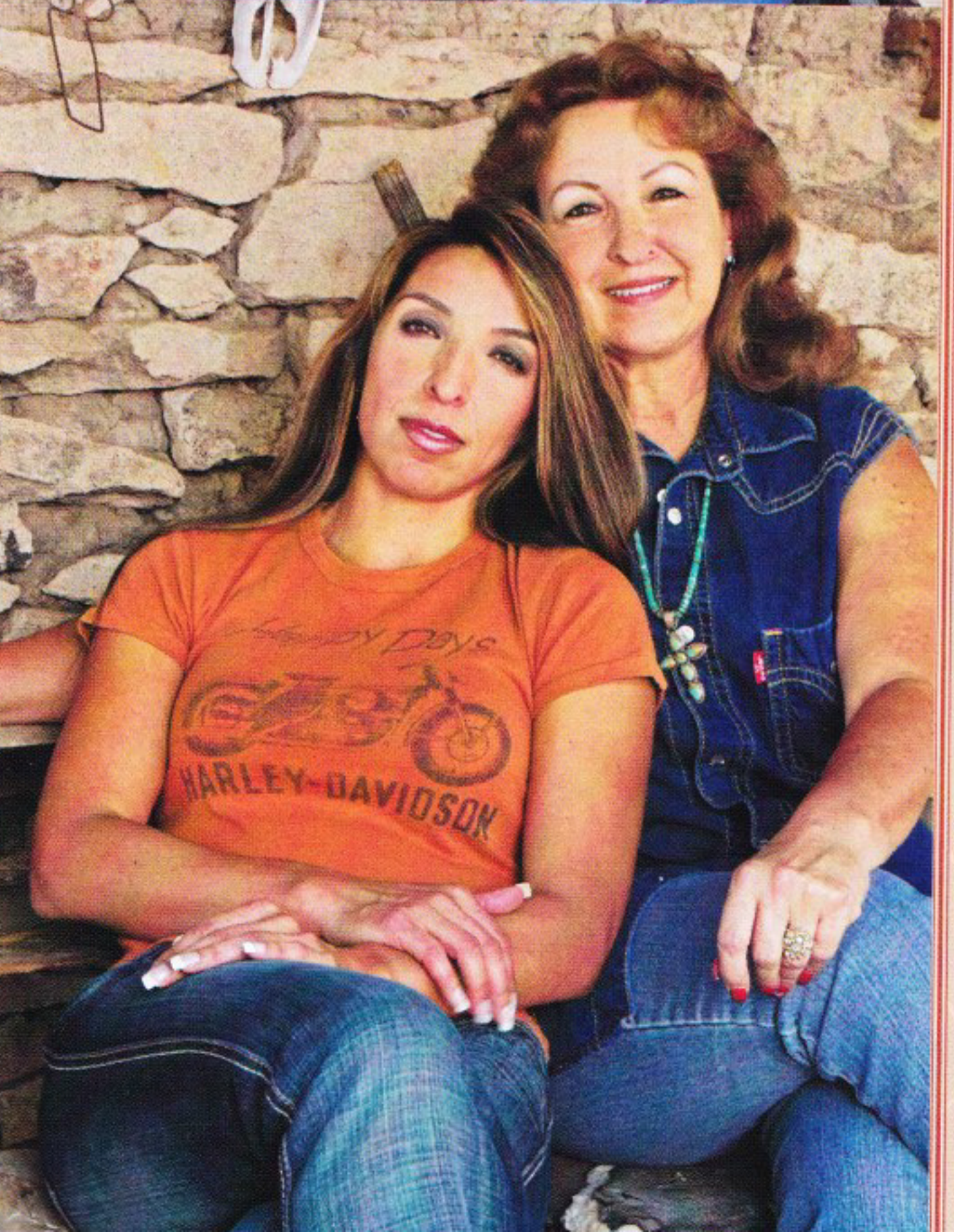
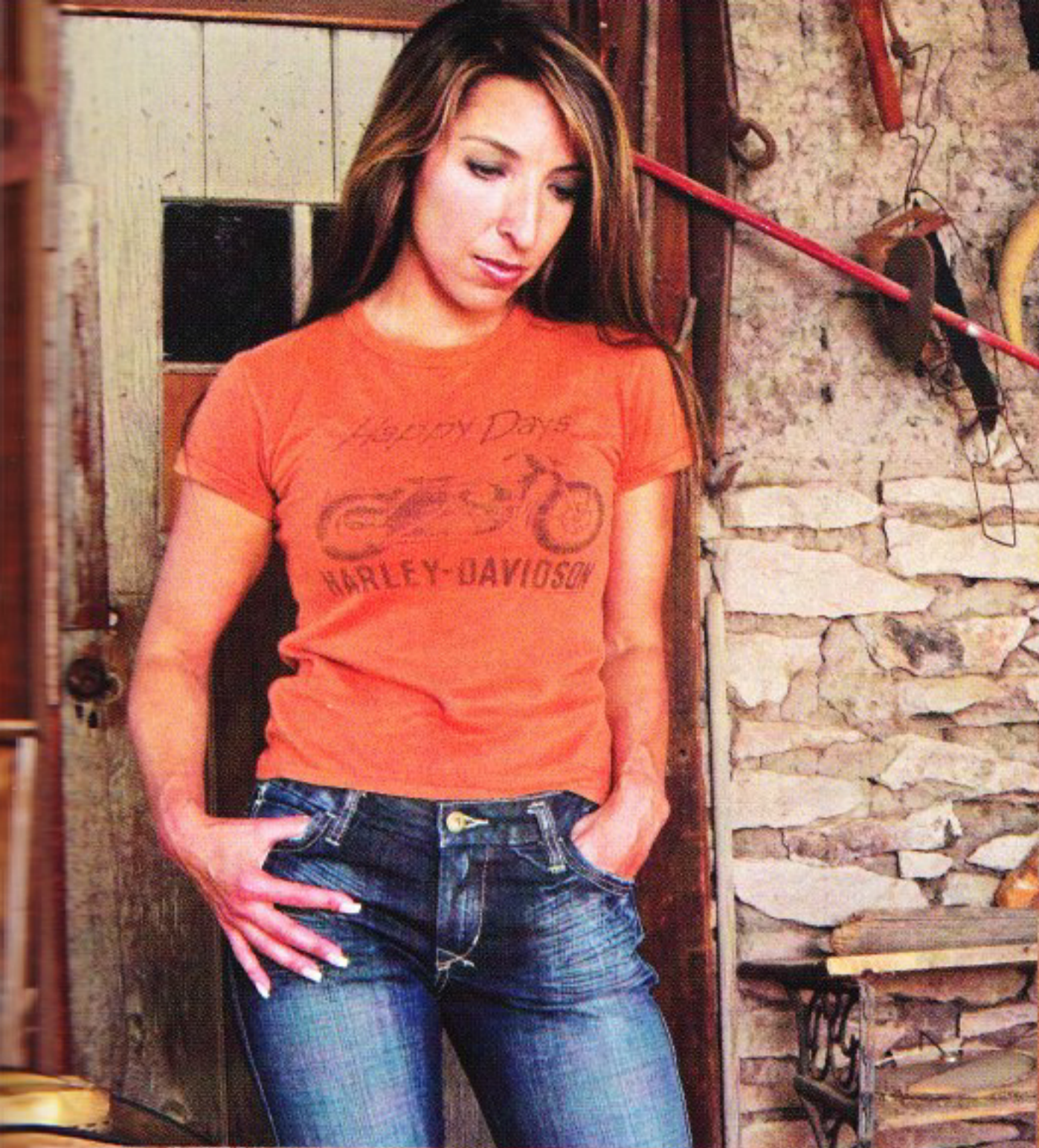


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birthing canal I was supposed to be a boy, and then somehow I came out as a girl. I've always loved cars, motorcycles and airplanes. I didn't do all the normal partying in high school, didn't go on a senior trip, I didn't do the normal partying in college because I was terrified I'd lose my scholarship. Racecars are my outlet; you legally get behind the wheel of a powerful car and drive incredibly fast, yet controlled. I like the combination of the two; it's just a rush." Denise also owns an 883 Harley Davidson and a Paul Yaffy Custom Chopper. In the last year she has attended two racecar driving schools where she drove a 706 Corvette and a Cobra Replica, and she attended the Formula One Race in Monaco in May 2006. In September she is attending another car event where she will drive a Ferrari F430, a Lamborghini Gallardo, a Bentley GT, a Corvette Z06, a Ford GT, a Porche 911 Turbo and a Maserati Grand Sport Spider.

Now, as a mentor to young people in the community, when asked

for advice and encouragement she responds, "Have faith in yourself. Ask yourself: what is my passion, what makes me happy every day? Find a way to do it. Along the way ask for help; I didn't get here all by myself. In my life a lot of really wonderful people passed along the kindness and caring I'm hoping to pass along. Give people a reason why they will be better for having a relationship with you."

Despite some longwearing insecurities, Denise remained (and remains!), as she puts it, "one of those crazy kids who really thought that if I worked hard enough and believed, I could change the world." She always tried to "rise above it" as her mother would say.

Today when she meets girls that come from her background she tells them, "You have to believe in yourself and keep pushing!" ♡