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It's not a new story. Young actress comes to Hollywood. Gets a job waiting tables. And waits. To be quickly (or not so quickly) discovered. Natalie Raitano, the young star of the syndicated television series VIP, can relate. Since moving West from the Pennsylvania home where she grew up, this up and coming starlet paid her dues waiting tables, doing odd jobs, and most significantly, teaching aerobics at a popular Los Angeles gym where she ultimately caught her "big break."

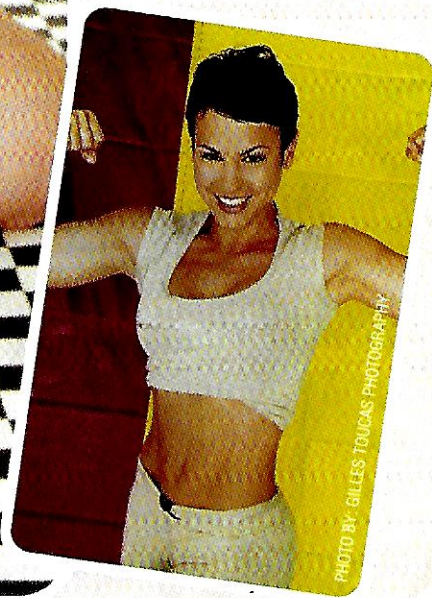


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Natalie Raitano

by Scott D. Jones

A trained gymnast with a degree in dance, Natalie found that teaching aerobics gave her an opportunity to combine her love of hip-hop dancing, performing and interacting with people. Working out of the Martin Henry fitness studio, she led three to four classes a day and generated a following that included celebrities like Chris Noth (for-

merly of "Law and Order") and model Beverly Johnson. "I've always liked

to dance and teaching is a lot of fun. I had a great time there. I love people and I still have many friends that used to be in my class that are still friends of mine today."

Her vibrant personality and ability to motivate people led to her being named host of ESPN2's "Hip Hop Body Shop," which offered daily half-hour doses of what Natalie describes as "Natalie being Natalie." "I learned how to work in front of the camera and interact with people. It was good for me to be on the show."

During the show's run in 1997, Natalie also took on a number of personal training clients and through her association with interior designer Natalie Zimmerman, met producer J.F. Lawton ("Pretty Woman" and "Under Siege").

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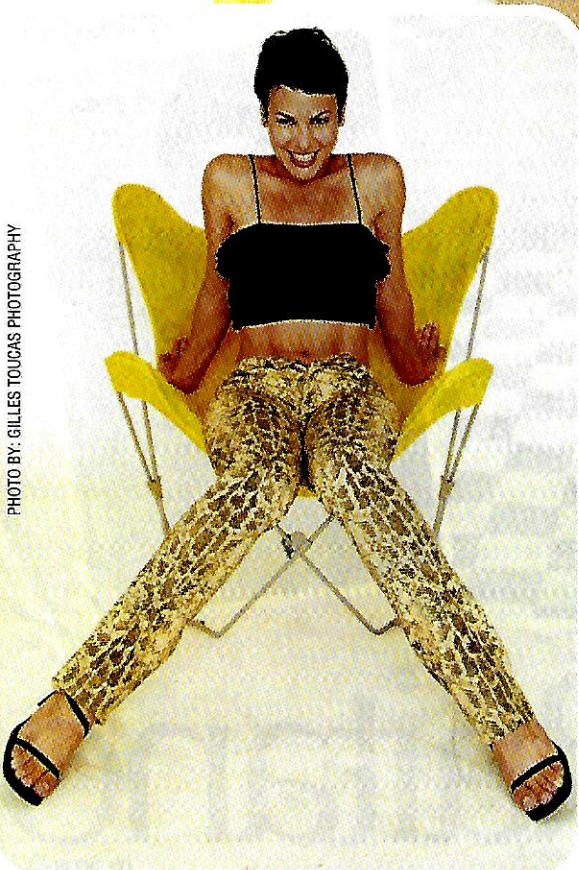


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Lawton was working on a new show ("VIP") for Pamela Anderson Lee. Zimmerman arranged a meeting for Natalie. According to Lawton, "she just leapt off the screen" and the rest, as they say, is history.

Cast as weapons and explosives expert Nikki Romano on the popular action-adventure program, Natalie says the role is perfect for her. "She's my alter ego. It's like a dream come true because she likes to have fun and so do I." While shooting people and blowing things up may seem unnatural on the surface, Natalie is quick to point out that her character has a tough exterior but is actually very soft inside, much like herself. But don't expect her to pull a gun the next time she has a problem. Although, she admits, "I'd sure love to at times."

Working on a show that's an equal mix of superficial beauty and campy substance, this 5'3" fireplug, who had never fired a gun before being cast on the show, more than holds her own on working alongside Pamela Anderson Lee and
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beautiful bodies. Singled out as a "Woman on the Verge" by Playboy magazine, the publication points out that Natalie plays a character that can "kick your butt and still be sexy." Of course, that doesn't happen without putting some time in the gym.

"I work out three to four times a week with a personal trainer," Natalie says. "I participate in Barry's Boot Camp, where I do a lot of cardiovascular work. I try not to do too much weights because it causes me to bulk up."

Her best feature? "My abs, no question because it takes peoples attention away from my butt." The wardrobe department agrees as you'll see Natalie wearing t-shirts and tops that bare her mid-section at various times on most episodes.

Natalie admits to having some eating vices including cheeseburgers, potato chips and pizza, but she is quick to point out that for her, moderation is everything. "I'm happy with the way I look and I feel good about me. If I want to eat something, I'm going to do it, I'm just not going to go over-

board."

While she doesn't worry about her weight, Natalie does admit that she and other cast members have been known to lobby producers about the shooting schedule. "Look, it's a fact that if you shoot the episodes where we have to wear bikinis earlier in the season, we're going to look better."

As loyal VIP viewers know, the program is about a group of Hollywood bodyguards led by Lee (of red Baywatch swimsuit fame). The setting allows for cast members to be involved in a variety of settings. Which was the most outrageous? "No question - the time Pam and I had to audition as strippers in Las Vegas. We had to wear high heels and really play the role. It was a lot of fun."

Through the show, Natalie and Pam have become close friends. "She's one of the smartest ladies in Hollywood," Natalie points out. "We're like sisters. We go out and have fun together and she's really taken me under her wing." Of course, there are some interesting downsides also.

"People always try and get to Pam through me and it's very upsetting. They'll say, why don't you come over and by the way, what's Pam doing tonight or something like that. I just
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them



to ask Pam themselves if they want to talk to her."

During the show's hiatus this spring, Natalie took a turn at prime time with a guest role on the CBS-TV show "Martial Law." While she's done an occasional Tae-Bo class, Natalie said she was ready to learn some new martial arts moves. "I learned a lot of new moves."

Natalie's advice to fitness professionals looking to break into the Hollywood scene? "Stay focused on what you believe in and go out and do it. When I first came to Southern California, I wasn't sure that I wanted to act, but now that I'm doing it, I love it and I can't think of doing anything else."

VIP airs in national syndication each weekend. For air dates, check your local listings.



PHOTO BY: ROB SIMS