

## Elinor knows best



By **Tricia Tomiyoshi**  
LODI LIVING EDITOR

Elinor Donahue enters Wine & Roses Hotel right on time and she is immediately greeted by a small entourage awaiting her arrival.

"You look so wonderful," coos Charlie Chapin, founder of Moonshadow Productions, who worked with Donahue the day before on the set of his latest documentary movie. He and his two colleagues stand in a semi-circle around her, admiring her. "Doesn't she?"

And she does.

She's dressed in a classic navy sweater and printed scarf, soft cream colored pants and navy pumps. Her hair is cropped short and kitten gray. When she smiles, her eyes still sparkle.

The years have been kind to Donahue. She has appeared in over 20 motion pictures and over 30 television shows including "The Andy Griffith Show," "The Odd Couple," and "Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman." But she is probably best known for her role as Betty "Princess" Anderson, the oldest daughter on "Father Knows Best."

Now 66, Elinor Donahue continues to enjoy a busy acting career.

This month, she expanded her repertoire by starring in a movie titled "Calling Home." It is a project which brought her to Lodi -- a place she calls adorable -- for the first time.

Produced by Stockton-based video production company Moonshadow Productions, the film is part drama, part educational video, which delves into the subject of elder abuse. Donahue plays Edith Barnes, a mother who has been abused and neglected by her son, while local actress Gro Bondevik plays her daughter.

"It was extraordinarily heartrending and had a very important message. I hope a lot of people will watch it," said Donahue, who stayed at Wine & Roses Hotel on her visit.

The film will be shown on SJTV, the public television station serving San Joaquin County, and the filmmakers plan to take it to PBS,

A&E and Lifetime networks. The film should be completed in two months.

Donahue was offered the role by Chapin, who has been friends with Donahue's oldest son Brian Ackerman since they worked together at a Watsonville restaurant in the '80s.

"I've admired Elinor's work since 'Father Knows Best' and we all had crushes on her. She made an indelible impression on me," said Chapin.

She didn't disappoint.

Filming, which was shot at Chapin's Lockeford home and at the Lockeford Springs golf course, started in the morning and was finished by mid-afternoon.

"I've never seen her in a dramatic role before but she knocked our socks off. Every member of the crew had tears streaming down their cheeks when we were through," said Chapin.

It was a new challenge for Donahue, who says she has done just about everything except ride an elephant in the circus.

Born on April 19, 1937, Mary Eleanor Donahue (she later professionally changed her name to Elinor Donahue) spent her early years in Tacoma, Wash., before she and her family moved to Hollywood. She started singing on the radio at the age of 2, began vaudeville at 4 and acted in her first movie, "Mister Big," when she was 6. She signed a contract with MGM soon after and a string of MGM movies followed. At 14, she worked as a Las Vegas showgirl ("Everyone lied about my age," she said).

But her breakout role came at 16, when she was cast as the smart and conscientious teenager Betty "Princess" Anderson in the black and white family classic, "Father Knows Best." The show premiered in 1954 and ran until 1960.

"In those days, TV filming took a long time. It would take the director and producer close to six or seven days to shoot a half hour show, which is unheard of now," remembered Donahue.

Technology has made the entertainment industry much faster now, said Donahue. "But we still sit



The cast of "Father Knows Best" consisted of, from left, Lauren Chapin, Jane Wyatt, Robert Young, Elinor Donahue and Billy Gray. This photo was taken in 1955.



Elinor Donahue and Gro Bondevik star in "Calling Home," which was filmed in Locketford.

around on the set, waiting. That hasn't changed," she laughed.

By the time she was in her 20s, she said she was semi-retired.

"But then looking back on it, I had done one job every year and I didn't have an agent. I would just get calls from people saying, 'Would you like to do such-and-such?'"

Such calls brought her some choice roles. She played Andy Griffith's girlfriend Ellie Walker in "The Andy Griffith Show," and Miriam Welby, Tony Randall's girlfriend in the "Odd Couple." She made guest appearances on shows like "Star Trek," "The Dukes of Hazzard," "The Golden Girls," and "Friends" and she even published a cookbook called "In the Kitchen with Elinor Donahue: Favorite Memories and Recipes from a Life in Hollywood."

These days, she lives in Sun City, a retirement community in Palm Desert, far from the Hollywood scene, with her husband, Lou Genevrino. Genevrino, a retired Broadway actor and dancer, is her third husband -- after her first husband Columbia TV executive Harry Ackerman, passed away in 1991, and she divorced her second husband, Richard Smith. Although she still misses being close to Hollywood, she has continued to make a name for herself on the big and small screens.

With every new role, she follows a tried and true method: "I read my lines through again and again. Like sometimes when you read a poem over and

over again, you remember it. I start to get used to the flow of it."

Then she likes to rehearse her lines with someone. Sometimes, Genevrino runs through the lines with her. Other times, she said she has been known to hire someone to rehearse with her.

"It takes several times for me to process it and I have a habit of transposing words," she said. "Then there's that moment of panic when you're filming a scene and you think, 'Oh my God, it's coming up and I can't remember it ...'"

But she said she lives for acting and collaborating with other actors.

For example, while filming "Calling Home," she and her co-star Gro Bondevik had an emotional scene where they were sitting side by side and Bondevik was holding her hand and rubbing it.

"Suddenly I flashed back to many years ago to a scene with Robert Young (her co-star on 'Father Knows Best')," said Donahue. "We were sitting on the steps of a faux church and I've always found it difficult to cry. But I remember picking up his hand and petting it. He got very prickly and said, 'What are you doing?' I guess he was embarrassed about his liverspots. But I said, 'Nothing. I'm just petting your hand because I love you,' and that helped me cry. I thought of that yesterday."

"It did help," said Gro Bondevik. "It helps you connect more when you do that and there's love. But I felt comfortable enough that I didn't have to ask her for permission to do that."

One of Donahue's favorite roles over the years has been playing Rebecca Quinn, Jane Seymour's sister on "Dr. Quinn Medicine Woman" ("I got to wear some terrific clothes and my character was perky and cute. It was fun to be a part of," said Donahue). "But my favorite role is really what I've last done."

For now, that means her current role in the elder abuse documentary as well as her stint playing Lady Palomar in Disney's "The Princess Diaries 2," which she also filmed this month. The movie will be released this summer.

As for the direction of her career, she admits that she isn't sure, but she doesn't mind that.

"I have no idea from one day to the next what I'll be doing," said Donahue, who already has another gig lined up. "But this has been a busy month. I'm in go mode at the moment and I'm enjoying it."

Perhaps next month she'll tackle that circus elephant.

## Donohue's career at a glance

**Elinor Donahue has starred in more than 20 movies and more than 30 television shows.**

### Movies

**1943: Mister Big**  
**1943: Honeymoon Lodge**  
**1947: Winter Wonderland**  
**1947: The Unfinished Dance**  
**1948: Three Daring Daughters**  
**1948: An Old-Fashioned Girl**  
**1949: Arkansas Swing**  
**1951: Her First Romance**  
**1952: Love Is Better Than Ever**  
**1959: Girls Town**  
**1990: Pretty Woman**  
**1991: Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare**

### Television

**1954-1960: "Father Knows Best"**  
**1960-1961: "The Andy Griffith Show"**  
**1964: "Many Happy Returns"**  
**1969: "In Name Only"**  
**1972: "Gidget Gets Married"**  
**1972-1974: "The Odd Couple"**  
**1977: "Mulligan's Stew"**  
**1977: "Father Knows Best: Home for Christmas"**  
**1978: "Doctors' Private Lives"**  
**1978: "Please Stand By"**  
**1979: "Doctors' Private Lives"**  
**1984-1986: "Days of Our Lives"**  
**1984: "Santa Barbara"**  
**1987: "The New Adventures of Beans Baxter"**  
**1989: "Generations"**  
**1990: "Get a Life"**  
**1992: "Eek! the Cat"**  
**1993-1998: "Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman"**  
**1995: "The Invaders"**

