

Role

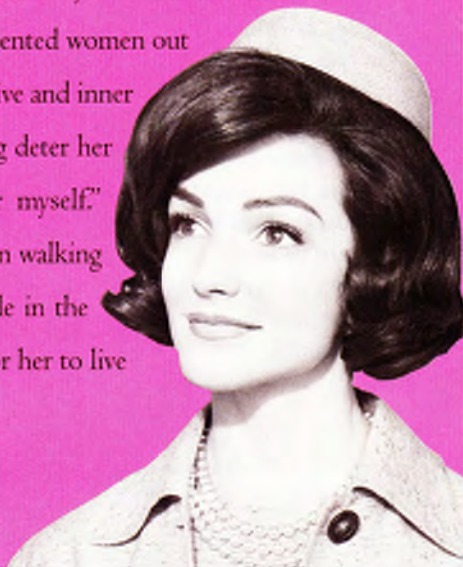


Call

Sex and the City is about to launch its final season, but Kristin Davis isn't about to retire anytime soon. By Bill Glovin ✿ Photograph by Jill Peters

K

ristin Davis is standing in the middle of a small, Upper West Side café looking for her lunch date. It isn't until we make eye contact that I realize that this is indeed the 38-year-old actress of *Sex and the City* fame. In jeans with her hair pulled back, she looks more like my daughter's cheerleading coach than Charlotte, the character she plays on the HBO show; recent *In Style* magazine cover girl; or one of E Channel's Most Eligible Hollywood Bachelorettes. ✿ Later, I'll think back to what Davis's Mason Gross theater buddy Paula Goldberg (GMGSA'89) told me on the phone from L.A.: "There are a lot of beautiful and talented women out there, but what separated Kristin was her incredible drive and inner confidence. She wasn't going to let anyone or anything deter her from her dream. I wish I could say the same for myself." ✿ Davis (MGS'A87), who rents an apartment within walking distance of the café, suggests that we retreat to a table in the rear since her success has made it nearly impossible for her to live







“I was never—and I mean never—able to land a major part in a Mason Gross production.”

DETAILS MAGAZINE
POSED DAVIS
(PRECEDING PAGE)
AS A PROVOCATIVE,
BIG-CITY BOMB-
SHELL, WHILE
IN STYLE
MAKEOVER GOT
HER TO
MASQUERADE AS
CHRISSE HYNDE OF
THE PRETENDERS,
JACKIE KENNEDY,
AND FORMER
HOLLYWOOD STAR-
LET JANE RUSSELL
(ABOVE).

anonymously; her love life and reported tension between the *Sex and the City* costars is constant fodder for tabloid speculation. “TV is such a familiar medium that total strangers feel like they know you. They don’t do this to film stars,” says Davis, reaching across the table and grabbing my arm to demonstrate the way fans sometimes put the squeeze on her.

I apologize for making her go through her life story yet again. “Anything for good old Rutgers,” says Davis, who proved as much in 2002 when she agreed to serve as a host for Rutgers On Broadway, a showcase for Mason Gross theater students. “Calista [Flockhart] asked me about it and I told her it was loads of fun,” she says, referring to another celebrity graduate from the theater program. “I told her she should do it.”

What will Davis order? I wonder. The pressure to stay slim will surely mean a salad; she has totally given up alcohol. “Cheeseburger and fries,” Davis says matter-of-

factly. Sensing my surprise, she confesses, “Food is one of life’s great pleasures; the chocolate cake here is a rare treat.” Since she’s already mentioned Flockhart (MGSA’88), I bring up her classmate’s well-publicized thinness. Instead of addressing it directly, she remarks on the dietary habits of the *Sex and the City* costars: “We certainly pay attention to what we eat, but we’re far from obsessed about it.”

Davis mentions co-stars Sarah Jessica Parker, Kim Cattrall, and Cynthia Nixon several times during the long conversation. She points out that she calls them to discuss Charlotte’s character and follows their cues when dealing with celebrityhood. Countless hours rehearsing and promoting the show have made them as close as sisters, she says. I’m reminded of this when I see her sitting at the Emmys with members of the *Sex and the City* cast and crew. Although Davis is the only one of the four not nominated, she has shown up to cheer on her friends.

Before Davis’s \$11 cheeseburger arrives, I learn that she was born in Boulder, Colorado, and that the Davises moved to Highland Park when Keith Davis came to Rutgers-New Brunswick to teach psychology. Kristin was two years old at the time and one of her first memories is walking to the movies in town. Later, in college, she periodically returned to Highland Park when she delivered flowers for Plantscapes in Somerset.

Davis’s first theatrical role—the wicked stepmother in *Cinderella*—came when she was a second grader in Highland Park’s Lafayette School. When Keith decided to accept an offer from the University of South Carolina in Columbia, Dorothy had mixed emotions: “It was the right move and Kristin was only eight, but I was disappointed because we had made some close friends and liked New Jersey.”

Soon after moving south, Dorothy suggested that her daughter take a small part in a community-theater production of *Snow White*. Davis stayed active in the troupe and, at age 17, won the play’s leading role.

Davis decided early on that she wanted to be an actress. “I wasn’t the kind of kid who always wanted to get up and perform, but I loved being around creative people, especially actors, and still do,” says Davis. While her parents didn’t discourage her, they promoted the idea of a well-rounded education and pushed their daughter to take dance, violin, and flute lessons. Smack in the middle of the Bible Belt, their liberal philosophy stood out in sharp contrast to that of their neighbors: Dorothy was active in Planned Parenthood and always had a copy of *Ms.* magazine on the coffee table. Kristin’s parents also rejected the idea of private schools—almost entirely segregated—for political reasons.

Keith wanted his daughter to pursue a bachelor’s degree at a respected liberal arts college close to home,

but Davis was intent on leaving the South and majoring in theater. For her, Rutgers had a familiar feel: "Our family often returned to the New Brunswick area during Christmas break to visit friends, and we always went to shows and museums in Manhattan. I loved it. When it was time to consider college, I thought of Rutgers."

Besides its proximity to New York City, Rutgers offered Davis a highly competitive theater department and Betty Comtois, the department's chair and a friend of her parents. Comtois told the Davises the truth: that their daughter's admission depended not only on her meeting academic standards but also passing an audition in front of a tough-minded faculty group that included William Esper, a professor of theater arts and a legendary acting coach.

Davis recalls coming north for her audition during the winter of her senior year in high school. When it was over, an unassuming man in a windbreaker came over and invited her to join the program. She had no idea at the time, but it was Esper, who sensed sensitivity, charm, and a considerable amount of potential in the young woman. "It's rare that I decide on the spot like that, but I knew instantly that I wanted her in the program," says Esper.

In her first year, Davis struggled to lose weight and her pronounced southern accent. "I had to learn speech all over again; it was very frustrating," she says. Most days began at 8 a.m. and ended at midnight; some nights she cried herself to sleep. "Kristin was young and unformed and had to learn to respond more freely and emotionally," says Esper.

The demands were such that half of the 30 classmates Davis started with were gone by their sophomore year and only 6 graduated. Adds Esper, "It's a very strenuous program that prepares students for a very strenuous business. Kristin was able to gradually learn to bring a very genuine, lovely sensibility that is right there on the surface of her work. Once she had confidence, I knew she would have a career."

"I knew two things: that I had some talent and that I was a very, very, very hard worker," says Davis, who tends to repeat words for emphasis. "If they had cut me, I would have been upset but I would have picked myself up and kept going. I just thought I was really good, although there wasn't any great part or performance to base that on. I just really believed in myself."

After pointing out that *Sex and the City* reached new heights in the ratings last year, Davis teasingly leans closer to the tape recorder to make a statement for the record: "I was never—and I mean never—able to land a major part in a Mason Gross production," she says. "I remember thinking, 'Am I pret-

ty enough? Will I have to be a character actress?'" It wasn't until she nailed a dramatic monologue and a comedy sketch in an annual showcase for Mason Gross students that Davis began to think differently. "Afterward, agents and casting directors approached me with their business cards. I can still see the looks on the faces of some really, really surprised professors,"

(continued on page 42)



FROM A HIGHLAND PARK TODDLER TO A TEENAGE SNOW WHITE, DAVIS LATER EVOLVED INTO EVIL SEDUCTRESS BROOKE, SEXY CHARLOTTE (WITH *SEX AND THE CITY*'S CYNTHIA NIXON, SARAH JESSICA PARKER, AND KIM CATTRALL IN *CHI-CHI BLACK*), AND FRESH-FACED MODEL.



PHOTOGRAPHS, TOP LEFT AND RIGHT, COURTESY OF THE DAVIS FAMILY; CENTER, FOX TELEVISION; BOTTOM LEFT, COURTESY OF *SEX AND THE CITY*; RIGHT, STEVE SANDS/CORBIS SYGMA

Drop us a note!

Tell us what you like about *Rutgers Magazine*.
Or what you don't.

Send us your thoughts via e-mail, postcards, or even cocktail napkins.

Rutgers Magazine, 101 Somerset Street, New Brunswick, NJ 08901-1281
Fax: 732-932-6950 rutgersmagazine@ur.rutgers.edu



Trust and Investment Services at UnitedTrust



tired of portfolio reviews in Pittsburgh?
frustrated by customer service in Charlotte?
had it with trust decisions in Boston?

— we can relate

Seems every bank these days promises to be your best friend. There when you need them. A financial partner. So, why are they taking your money and running away with it? For over 100 years, UnitedTrust has been right here — building wealth locally for individuals, families and businesses. Ready for a bank that treats you like a neighbor? We can relate. For more information call 908.429.2303.

 **UNITED TRUST**
BANK

We can relate™

Personal Trust
Services

Estate Planning
& Settlement

Investment
Management

Asset Allocation
Programs

IRA Rollovers

401(k) Plans

Custody Services

UnitedTrust is a
proud sponsor of
Rutgers Athletics

100

years of commitment
to community

www.unitedtrust.com

Role Call

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 29

she says with a self-satisfied, savoring-the-memory smile.

Instead of pursuing an MFA degree, Davis moved to Manhattan in the summer of 1988, enrolled in Esper's New York acting studio, and worked as a waitress and hostess to support herself. Countless auditions led to some commercial work, the role of Hero in a regional production of *Much Ado About Nothing*, and a three-month role as nurse Betsy on *General Hospital*. Through it all, Davis watched many of her friends and former classmates leave the business and move on to other careers.

In 1991, a New York City writers' strike gave her the push she needed to relocate to L.A., where she found a tiny apartment in Santa Monica, landed a Miller beer commercial, and was dragged by a friend to her first yoga class. "For years, it was yoga class during the day, acting class at night, and auditions in between. Sometimes I'd do as many as 12 auditions a day. At one point I was thinking, 'Maybe my destiny is to become a yoga instructor.' I didn't have a lot of money but it didn't matter. I was pretty darn happy."

Still, Davis wasn't ready to give up her dream. She paid her dues with several TV pilots and small parts on shows like *The Larry Sanders Show*; *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*; and *ER*.

Melrose Place producer Darren Star hired Davis in 1995 to play the role of neurotic, rich girl Brooke Armstrong Campbell. "Aside from being really beautiful, Kristin had a really good sense of humor and was really smart; I remember being impressed that she had a degree from Rutgers," says Star. In the role, she captured and then crushed the heart of kindhearted cutie Billy Campbell, played by Andrew Shue. When Star left the show, the writers turned her character from manipulative and funny to vindictive and mean. Davis's second season climaxed with Brooke's death.

But by then Davis had made a big impression, making viewers loathe Brooke even more than the show's scheming Amanda Woodward, played by Heather Locklear. "There were posi-

tives and negatives about the experience, but you don't go on *Melrose Place* to try to be good, you go on to try to look good," says Davis.

The part increased her visibility, however, and offers, though many were disappointing, came pouring in. One part included a guest role on *Seinfeld*. In the episode "The Pothole," Jerry breaks up with her after her toothbrush takes a tumble into the toilet. Star found her very funny in the role and, soon after, asked Davis to read for a new HBO project he was creating: a saucy show about an insightful, nicotine-addicted New York City sex columnist and her three single girlfriends.

Star first thought of Davis for the part of Carrie, but Charlotte seemed a better fit. "I felt that Kristin could really embody this very proper, polite, well-put-together, slightly old-fashioned single woman who tries to play by the 'rules,'" says Star. "Kristin had a wonderful, understated way of playing comedy that just comes from character and behavior. It's a very sophisticated skill."

In early episodes, a naive Charlotte served as a foil to the other three characters' modern promiscuity and cynicism. Since then, she has become more risqué and wise. Charlotte has dated some kinky characters through the show's five seasons, including a lover who screamed obscenities at her in bed and another whose idea of a goodnight kiss was licking her face. "Sometimes it's not fun at all," she points out. "I didn't think a guy screaming obscenities at me was at all funny. In fact, I hated it. But everyone else thought it was hysterical."

The show, which begins its sixth and final season in June, picks up for Charlotte, the first character on the show to marry, where last season left off: her Jewish divorce lawyer, who doubles as her boyfriend, tells her that his faith prevents him from pursuing a serious relationship.

"I just go with the flow; it may look like we're improvising at times, but every line is scripted," says Davis, who suddenly resembles the glossy and perfect looking Charlotte when—for a moment—she removes her scrunchie and waves of chestnut brown hair fall around her

small-boned face. "A 22-minute episode takes two full weeks of 12- to 14-hour days to shoot. A season took up to four months to shoot."

Davis wasn't surprised when executive producer Michael Patrick King decided to end the show: "Michael feels that too many shows stay on the air because they can, not because they should. *The Sopranos* people are talking about eventually turning their show into a film. While nothing has been officially discussed, I'd like to see the same thing happen to us. Aside from that, I'd like to work in film for the next 10 years."

When *Sex and the City* leaves the air and Davis gives up the \$100,000 she reportedly makes per episode, she will be most proud of the fact that she was involved in a show that she believes was important to women. "Not only did our show do wonderful things for HBO, which didn't have much programming for women, but it sends the important message that sex plays

a vital role in the hearts and minds of women, that friendship counts for an awful lot, and that you don't need to follow anyone else's lead," she says. "I think that's pretty much my mantra as well."

Davis stands to leave and checks for messages on her BlackBerry. She'll soon head back to L.A.—her home of choice—and return to Manhattan when work calls, like *Exonerated*, the off-Broadway play she starred in this winter. She thanks me for not asking about her personal life: "I always hear the same thing. 'I don't want to ask you, but my editor wants to know.'" Then Davis adds, "For now, it's mainly me; my golden retriever, Callie; and my family and friends. But I would like to have a kid and a relationship. Notice the order in which I said that. Aren't I a bad, bad girl?" □

RUTGERS MAGAZINE senior editor Bill Glavin has cleared his schedule to watch the final season of *Sex and the City*.

Discover the Year-Round Beauty of Meadow Lakes

Meadow Lakes is a full-service retirement community on 103 acres of natural beauty with three sparkling lakes.

Visit today to experience the beauty of Meadow Lakes and learn more about our Cottage Homes, now under construction — limited number available!

Meadow Lakes

A FULL-SERVICE RETIREMENT COMMUNITY

300 Meadow Lakes • Hightstown, NJ 08520 • www.phsnet.org



Affiliated with Presbyterian Homes & Services, Inc., a not-for-profit, non-sectarian corporation.



Call 1-800-564-5705 today to learn more!