



DIANE DONIAN PASKERIAN



Class of 1989

Silver Circle Profile
By: Kevin Wing



When thumbing through the pages of **Diane Donian Paskerian's** professional portfolios and scrapbooks, one could say that her many years as a television producer in Hollywood and the Bay Area were a colorfully unique tapestry of a life and career that only dreams are made of.

For Paskerian, her tapestry was far from being just a dream. She lived it, and as she has done with anything she has ever been involved with in her life, she gave it her all, and then some.

Many may not know Paskerian's name like they would a popular television news anchor's, for instance, or like the many world-renowned entertainers she worked for and became friends with (**Liberace** and **Jack Benny**, to name just two) but to know Paskerian's career accomplishments is to say that she has had her fingerprints on nearly everything — from the early years of television in Hollywood to local TV programming here in the Bay Area. And then, beyond all of that, a different kind of career path in her later years working for two California governors.

But, more on that later.

Paskerian, a 1989 inductee of the *Silver Circle*, is a Bay Area native (born and raised in Oakland) who was educated here (UC Berkeley, San Francisco State University) and went to Hollywood and made a name for herself.

After earning her degrees in the Bay Area, she transferred to UCLA to obtain her masters degree in communications, radio, TV and film. While studying there, Paskerian went to work for ABC-TV beginning in the late 1950s. She worked in the production department and was assigned to five network shows, including *The Betty White Show*, *The Lawrence Welk Show* and *The 76 Sports Club*.

"I was always the only girl on the set," Paskerian says. "The whole crew were like big brothers to me. They were very protective of me and we had great fun."

From there, she spent six months working for "Ol' Blue Eyes" himself, **Frank Sinatra**, during his live shows at the El Capitan Theatre, located at that time on Vine Street in Hollywood.

"I was very excited about working with Frank Sinatra," Paskerian recalls. "It was really a lot of fun and exciting. His show included the **Nelson Riddle** orchestra. At this time, Sinatra was going through a divorce with **Ava Gardner**, so he wasn't in the happiest frame of mind. But, it was great to work with a big star like him."

Sinatra's show ran for six months. But, when one door closed, another opened. And the next door for Paskerian was opened by none other than Liberace, who was starting a new variety series for ABC in the late 1950s. **Gil Rodin**, the former producer of *The Bob Crosby Show* on CBS, hired Paskerian. "He gave me my big break," she says.

Liberace's ABC variety show was a tremendously wonderful experience for Paskerian. Not only was it the beginning of a new television assignment for her, it was the start of a lifelong friendship with the famous pianist and entertainer.

Paskerian served on his show's production staff as "script girl" and production coordinator. It was up to her to pre-time each 15-minute segment.

"I sat in the control booth with the director and pre-timed each song and conversation in order to end the show on time," Paskerian says. "Directors from ad agencies directed their own commercials in the booth."

She also appeared on-camera. Once, Liberace saw Paskerian dancing during show rehearsals. He was impressed, and asked her to dance solo on the show and introduced her to the audience. Paskerian says it was "an incredible experience."

"We did two live-to-tape shows every day, and then (Liberace) would go home to Palm Springs," Paskerian says. "Liberace also enjoyed Middle Eastern Armenian food, and knowing that I was of Armenian descent, he would always ask me when I would have him over for dinner. Finally, I did, but I had to borrow a few pots and pans. I made shish kabob, pilaf and grape leaf dolma, and had to teach his housekeeper how to make it. She continued to make it for many years."

Liberace's series lasted two years, ending in 1960. But Paskerian's friendship would last until his death in 1987.

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"He was a good, kind man, and always very humble," Paskerian says. "A most wonderful person. We would visit with each other whenever he would come up to the Bay Area to perform at Circle Star Theater in San Carlos). I feel very blessed and fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with him, and to know him as a friend."

After the Liberace program ended, opportunity came knocking on Paskerian's door again, this time from NBC, and the offer to work on the production staff for NBC's TV specials, hosted by the likes of **Bing Crosby**, **Shirley Temple** and **Dinah Shore** (Paskerian also appeared as a dancer on Shore's special). Additionally, Paskerian worked on TV pilots for NBC and filmed at MGM Studios.

It was during this time that Paskerian learned that her father, back home in the Bay Area, had cancer. A director, with whom she had worked with in Hollywood, was directing a new show in San Francisco. He gave her an opportunity to come back to the Bay Area to work and be with her father. Paskerian landed at KPIX, which was about to launch a show called *PM East, PM West* — a unique show based in two cities, the other being New York City. **Mike Wallace**, who later went on to gain even more fame on CBS's *60 Minutes*, hosted the East Coast segments, and San Francisco TV critic **Terrence O'Flaherty** hosted from the West Coast.

"It was the first syndicated TV show from San Francisco," Paskerian explains. "My job was to plan the format and book the guests. Her long hours at work didn't mesh well with a commute home to Oakland every evening, so since KPIX had a trade deal with the Sheraton Palace Hotel, Paskerian stayed there during the week, then be at home in the East Bay on weekends.

"At night, I had to attend openings (Venetian Room, Circle Star Theater) to line up talent for the show, so it was the only workable thing to do by staying in the City during the week," she says.

Unfortunately, the transcontinental show would last one season, ending in 1962.

A series of other opportunities would follow, but it meant a move back to Los Angeles in 1963. Paskerian worked on the *Hold the Phone* quiz show and *Queen for a Day*, produced a drama series with

actor **Lew Ayres** at Los Angeles station KTTV, and was associate producer of The **Eleanor Roosevelt** Cancer TV Special. During rehearsals, Paskerian did a soft shoe dance with **Burt Lancaster**. Paskerian also went back to work for ABC as production coordinator of three *Academy Awards* telecasts, beginning in 1964.

Before returning to the Bay Area in the mid-1960s, Paskerian worked on one more Los Angeles-based program — the *Bell Telephone Hour*. It originated from Disneyland in Anaheim, and she would work on the production staff as well as a dancer on the show. Since the show could only tape when Disneyland was closed to park visitors, the staff taped the program between midnight and 6 a.m. **Hermes Pan** was the choreographer.

She remembers the experience as being "the most fun — Disneyland in the middle of the night was an amazing place to be. It was just magical and very fairy-tale-ish."

In 1967, Paskerian returned to the Bay Area and to KPIX to work on a new show hosted by **John Bartholomew Tucker**, a live, five days-a-week talk and variety program. Paskerian served as talent and production supervisor, booking all of the show's guests. The following year, she moved across town to KBHK and a new talk show, *The Joe Dolan Show*. **Dolan** hosted a radio show on KNEW at that time, and parlayed his success to TV.

"We would have three guests on every show," Paskerian says. "Some of the guests included Jack Benny, **Muhammad Ali**, **David Susskind**, **Rex Harrison**, **Paul "Red" Faye**, **Arthur Hailey** and **Caspar Weinberger**. It was a controversial show for a very controversial period of time in the Bay Area and in the country."

It was through Benny's appearance on the Dolan program that Benny developed a fondness for Paskerian. Benny invited her to his show at the Circle Star Theater, then invited her to join him and his agent for dinner. "When he learned that I lived in Oakland, he invited me and my mother to be his guest when he played with the Oakland Symphony."

Paskerian's tenacity helped her get an exclusive interview with Benny for Dolan's show. In fact, Benny gave only one press conference at the Fairmont Hotel. "I overheard he was going to the

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Curran Theatre, and since KBHK was around the corner, I asked if we might tape our show and then I would arrange a dinner at the Jewish deli, David's, across the street. It worked!," she says.

It was while working on the Dolan program that Paskerian received a call from future California governor, **George Deukmejian**. In the late 1960s, Deukmejian was running for state attorney general and asked her if she would be interested in working as his advance publicity director, setting up radio, TV and newspaper interviews throughout the state. The timing was right; Dolan's show was going off the air, so Paskerian accepted, and hence, a new political career was born for her.

Deukmejian became attorney general, and in 1983, he was elected governor. He appointed Paskerian as deputy director of the state's Office of Tourism. **Pete Wilson**, the former San Diego mayor and senator, succeeded Deukmejian as governor. Wilson retained Paskerian's services and she remained as deputy director.

Throughout the latter part of her career, Paskerian had a very successful public relations firm. She is a member of the Bay Area's *Broadcast Legends* organization. Among her many activities, she has served on many boards, including the California Film Commission and is currently serving as a board trustee for the Museum of Performance and Design in San Francisco. She is also a director of the Arts Foundation for the California State Summer School for the Arts, appointed by two governors.

Paskerian and her husband, **Chuck**, reside in San Francisco, and have four sons. They love traveling, exploring the world and enjoy attending ballet, symphony and opera performances.



(Kevin Wing pens Silver Circle and Gold Circle profiles each month for "Off Camera." The 24-year Bay Area television journalist is a news writer at NBC Bay Area/KNTV in San Jose and is a host and producer of travel programs, including "Catch a Wave.")

Gold & Silver Circle Nomination Deadline April 10



This is your opportunity to honor the careers and contributions of our Chapter's most distinguished colleagues by nominating them to the *Gold & Silver Circle* Class of 2010. Those selected as inductees will join the ranks of television luminaries such as **Pete Wilson, Barbara Rodgers, Dave McElhaton, Wendy Tokuda, Rigo Chacon, Ysabel Durón, Dennis Richmond, Belva Davis and Shirley Temple Black.**

The *Silver Circle* is not an award — it is a society of honor. To be eligible, individuals must have been actively engaged in television broadcasting for 25 years or more (with at least half of those years in the Chapter region), made a significant contribution to Northern California television and distinguished themselves within the industry and the community. *Silver Circle* inductees are elected by current members of the *Silver Circle*.

The *Gold Circle* honors individuals who have been actively engaged in television broadcasting for 50 years or more (with at least half of those years in the Chapter region) and who have fulfilled the same criteria as *Silver Circle* nominees. *Gold Circle* inductees are elected by the NATAS Chapter Board of Governors.

Neither the candidate nor the sponsor need be a member of NATAS to nominate.

Nomination forms are available at www.emmysf.tv or by calling 650-341-7786 and due by Thursday, April 10, 2010.

The Induction Luncheon will be held Saturday, October 23, 2010 at the Hilton Hotel - San Francisco - Financial District.



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