



# At Home with Wendy Walker

CNN, Senior Executive Producer, *Larry King Live*

By Patty Kovacevich

How often does a recognized world figure live right in one's own back yard? Not very. However, right here in our idyllic local community of Rancho Santa Fe resides Wendy Walker, a woman who holds one of the most powerful positions in the media world.

Her beautiful home, surrounded with majestic palms and sweet-smelling eucalyptus, is an oasis, a sanctuary of impressive splendor. Charm and grandeur whisper "welcome" to each visitor and the quiet serenity makes all of us stop momentarily before heading inside to meet its owner.

A lovely woman with attractive features, she carries herself with a confident, gliding stride; her demeanor reflects sophisticated social graces. The East Coast girl, born and educated in Virginia is quite apparent, even today, after moving here from the nation's capital some 10 years ago. Fresh faced, California casual also shines through as Walker opens up to discuss her home and her life with us, something she rarely does.

Her somewhat demure presence is neither shy nor bold. It's somewhere in-between. She bears a commanding air about her that clearly marks her as an astute, professional woman, yet she exudes an almost tangible kindness that invites others around her to feel at ease. She's more accustomed to operating under the radar, promoting other people or situations, or discussing world affairs, rather than going on about herself. It's actually a refreshing polarity, counter to most people who hold such influential world positions.

Wendy Walker has indeed spent her remarkable life putting others in the spotlight. It's obvious she doesn't easily boast of her well-earned achievements nor of life's roads that took her to where she is today as CNN's Executive Producer of *Larry King Live*. With the slight shyness of a blushing starlet, she begins to open up to tell me how she reached her powerful present-day media pinnacle, but first her assistant politely interrupts to inform her she has an important call. It's Larry King and nothing takes precedence over that. In an upbeat tone, she discusses tonight's show with him, and ends the business conversation with, "Love you." I make a note to ask her about that later.

An art major at college in Virginia in the '70s was more about getting an "M-r-s." degree and, with no wedding bells ringing at graduation time, Walker says her dad gave her \$40 and off she went with a couple of college friends to Washington, D.C. – not with a plan in hand, but simply because it was the closest big city. Just to land a job and get her feet on the ground, she started selling

clothes at Brooks Brothers. One of her customers not long thereafter recruited her to run a new art gallery and she accepted. After all, she was an art major. Oddly, that was no fun for her, but a new offer soon came from another customer named Ethel Kennedy. She asked Walker to be her private secretary. At the time Ethel Kennedy was running her husband's Bobby Kennedy Foundation and was seeking assistance for the RFK Pro-Celebrity Tennis Tournament to raise additional funds.

"I began as the liaison between the charity and ABC, dealing with the broadcast producers of the tournament, going back and forth to help make it a seamless presentation behind the scenes and in front of the cameras. I loved it. It was organized, visual, and really fun," Walker recalled.

Lots of galas, political and celebrity hobnobbing and dinners ensued. One night, Walker met Ethel Kennedy's friend, who was ABC's White House producer.

"I remember fantasizing about what an exciting job he had as White House producer. It seemed far too out of reach for me, I kept it in my imagination as my "someday" dream job," said Walker. "Later I was asked to work for half a year on another nationally televised professional tennis tournament and I was bitten by the bug. I determined to myself then that I would become a television producer."

She soon marched right into ABC News in Washington and declared she wanted to apply for a job as a producer. Under a breathy giggle, the lady in HR offered her a written and typing test to apply for a secretarial position.



1980 CNN Washington

Photography by Martin Mann



"I was 24 at the time, thought I was moving backwards, but I did it anyway. I actually didn't pass the first test, but reapplied and passed the second to become a secretary to the deputy bureau chief at ABC," she now chuckles back. "Completing a desk assistant application right next to me was a cute little girl named Katie Couric."

A pre-computer, entirely different media era, it was 1979 and Frank Reynolds was ABC-TV's evening news anchor. Everyone on the news set was smoking and had to put out their cigarettes before the LIVE newscast started, according to Walker. Bells rang for breaking news alerts on the wire. Icon Barbara Walters, based in New York, would actually use Walker's desk when she came to Washington.

"On the scene of the Washington bureau thundered the controversial roar of a guy named Ted Turner who had a strange concept of a 24-hour TV news broadcast. Everyone thought his idea was ridiculous, but a few brave pioneers decided to pony up," Walker said. "The ABC Bureau Chief actually agreed to go and began looking to staff his new Washington CNN team, asking if I'd like to join him. Sam Donaldson encouraged me to go for it, telling me that remaining at ABC would mean many more years of the same for me and most of my young colleagues. That was just the rules then."

She agreed to go. Walker's Bureau Chief asked her to refer any other young members of the team who might be good to bring along. She told him Katie Couric was looking to be a writer and would be a good pick. Couric went. He also took Bernie Shaw, enlisted a few other adventurers, and off they all went with the winds of change in pursuit of new opportunity at this strange new network called CNN.

"There was nothing on the assignment desk at the Bureau. I went out and bought a rolodex and brought in coffee cups from my own house. We began it all with a really small team wearing every hat imaginable. 'Whatever it took to get a job done' was our motto. Soon I put together a public affairs weekend show and quickly became a producer," Walker said.

It was the Reagan era and a presidential trip was underway. Walker credentialed the CNN staff in preparation for their departure and actually credentialed herself in case of last-minute manpower needs. Indeed, at the last minute, additional help was necessary, and she was called up.

"It was the Summit at Versailles and such intense, hard work, but I knew I was in my element. When we returned, CNN decided they were going to send a producer to the White House all day. That turned out to be me. I covered Reagan and George Bush Sr., all the conventions, every crisis, everything. It was ten years of a non-stop, thrilling beat. I absolutely loved it, but I was slowly wearing thin," she explained.

Eventually, she decided it was long enough.



Above: Wendy and Kati Couric  
Left (Top): Wendy and Ronald Reagan  
Left (Middle): Larry and Wendy  
Left (Bottom): Nancy Reagan, Wendy and Larry



"I remember the day and the moment well. It was August 1993. I was working madly at the white house that day as President Clinton was making a huge announcement. I was running around to cover it when my phone rang. It was the president of CNN calling and he bluntly asked, "Hi, Wendy ... would you like to produce the Larry King Show? Without a moment's hesitation, I replied, 'Sure!'"

At the time, Larry's show was out of Washington, and Walker had worked just down the hall from him, seen him a hundred times, but they didn't know each other at all. Word had it that he had his mind set on a sports guy for the job. As a courtesy, Larry agreed to have lunch with her and right out of the gate asked her about the impressive reference letters she'd been sending him from heavyweights like T. Boone Pickens, President Bush, and Ethel Kennedy.

"When he immediately started asking me questions about the high-profiled public figures I knew and their letters supporting me, my retort to Larry was simply, 'Would you like to see more?' He hired me right away."

After 14 years, Walker feels she has such a palette of life for each show's content. She sees it as "total pop culture" – Anna Nicole one night; Katrina victims the next.

Top: Larry, Wendy and Paul McCartney  
2nd: Larry, Wendy and Nelson Mandela  
3rd: Wendy and Jim Carrey  
Bottom: Wendy with Emmy



"It's really a show about what people are talking about. To me, it's a huge responsibility and I try to make each show interesting by choosing stories of the moment," Walker explained.

Major news stories deserve intense coverage. She made sure they covered the 9/11 story for over three months, choosing to respect the massive importance and global interest of the issue. In American culture, celebrities rule in everyday news, so Walker makes sure to bring attention to a news crisis of great proportion but to splash in lighter stories for the viewers also.

Obviously, whatever she's doing, she's doing it right. Every night the show averages over a million viewers domestically and is broadcast in over 200 countries and territories.

Wendy is not all business. She's quite involved in the community of Rancho Santa Fe as a devoted single mother of two children, ages 12 and 9.

"I love Ranch. I have wonderful, incredible friends here. It's beautiful and the emphasis on family is so important. My children are wonderful, healthy, and have a happy, stable life here. They're now at ages where they ask me about current events and issues, even what guests I choose to have on the show," Walker said. "Before, when they were really little, they would tell people, 'Mommy watches TV for a living.' Time moves all too swiftly. I've learned truly to enjoy each moment of the day and to appreciate the simplest pleasures of life.

The walls of her beautiful, open-air, ranch-style home display smartly framed children's drawings with adorably misspelled messages like, "I love you, Mommy," written in crayon by tiny young hands. All this splashed within a splendidly refined décor. It's ultra-gorgeous-shabby-chic-meets-California-elegance-and-comfort. Her home is an inviting place reflecting refined taste with artistic style and splashed with memoirs of devotion to family and motherhood. Oh, and there's a golden Emmy statue sitting on the living room table with Misty, the beautiful, black, rescued kitty curled around it like it's all hers.



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Walker has found her secret niche as an en vogue closet fashionista. A lover of beautiful clothing, her spectacular walk-in closet is filled with gorgeous couture pieces that would make the iconic Coco Chanel gasp and genuflect. How cool is that? An executive powerhouse of a woman still has her feminine diva goin' on.

Her small office is a tech geek's dream: two walls bathed in framed photos of Walker smiling next to global leaders and Hollywood celebs and another wall is lined with flat screens which allow viewing of select networks simultaneously.

Few of us have it all. If you asked Walker, she'd probably blush and declare that she's "just doing her job," but her job happens to be presenting life-changing information on a show that's watched every single night by millions of people all over the world. Add podcasting to boot and add millions more.

She happens to have great respect for and thinks the world of Larry King, and when I ask her about that, "Love you," I overheard at the end of their phone conversation, she replied, "Oh, that. We always say that. We say that every day. That's how we work together and collaborate and create so successfully. He's amazing and we're two very best friends who absolutely, genuinely, love and respect one another. I'm so blessed."

Blessed she is. And she's earned her well-deserved acclaim by hard work. We think there's much more to come from this powerful, inspiring lady, and, fortunately for us, she's right here in our own back yard. And we're the lucky ones for that.

