





just your average average valley girl

Fox 25 news anchor maria stephanos

by **Gary Trask**

photos by **Kevin Harkins**

It's 3 o'clock on a Tuesday afternoon when Maria Stephanos appears at the main entrance of the Fox 25 studios in Dedham. It may be hours before she'll go on the air to deliver the nightly news, but the Groveland native looks like she just walked out of a swank Newbury Street spa.

Stephanos, one of the longest-tenured late-night news anchors in Boston, is wearing a wide smile and a hot pink outfit as she greets her visitor. She is as attractive in person as she is on TV, and her effervescent personality is unwavering, even in the first few moments you meet her.

Does she always look like this, her visitor wonders out loud?

"No, not quite," Stephanos, 43, says with a laugh. "Believe me, I have more than my share of jeans, baseball hat and T-shirt moments.

"But this is how I show up for work every day," she explains further. "I'm ready to go on the air as soon as I come through these doors. This is a visual medium. You always have to be prepared to get in front of that camera."

Her demeanor is refreshing, but not surprising. What you see is what you get, say the people who know her.

In fact, if you're among the loyal New Englanders who watch her on Fox 25 and you feel like you really know her, we've got a news flash for you: You probably do.

"There's not a TV Maria and an off-the-screen Maria; there's just one Maria," explains Fox 25 crime reporter Bob Ward, who has worked with Stephanos for more than a dozen years. "She's exactly the same in person as she is on TV. That's what's so great about her."

The drive to become a TV journalist began for Stephanos in her home on Seven Star Road in Groveland when she was 11 years old. To be more precise, the date was Aug. 16, 1977, the day Elvis Presley died.

Stephanos' parents, Nick and Lois Nionakis, were always very mindful and attentive of Maria and her younger sister, Nicole. But on this particular day they were transfixed in front of the television set.

"It stopped my parents in their tracks, which was really unusual for them," Stephanos recalls. "It was my first real taste of the power of this medium. From then on, I always wanted to be on TV. Not to be seen, but to be able to deliver the kind of news that would



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captivate people like my parents were that day.”

Young Maria’s penchant for a career in journalism grew stronger when she visited the tiny apartment of her grandparents, Theodore and Mary Metrakas, in Milton every Sunday afternoon for a traditional Greek dinner. As soon as the table was cleared and the kitchen was clean, everyone would cram into the living room to watch “60 Minutes.”

Her family didn’t know it at the time, but this routine helped spawn one of the more popular news anchors in Boston. Stephanos has become the face of Fox 25. And along the way she has also become a highly sought-after local celebrity. The station’s PR team receives at least 10 requests a month for Stephanos to host, emcee or speak at a charity event.

“It’s amazing, but wherever I go and someone hears I work at Fox 25, all they want to talk about is Maria,” Ward says.

When reminded of her notoriety, Stephanos acknowledges that it is flattering, but that it’s something she has never allowed herself to get too caught up in.

“I’ll always just think of myself as Maria Nionakis from Groveland,” she says convincingly. “I’m that same girl who grew up on Seven Star Road who loves the news, loves people and loves life. I don’t think of myself as Maria Stephanos ‘TV news lady.’ I really don’t. Because I think once you do that, the people at home can see it.”

Stephanos, who was born at Hale Hospital in Haverhill, mentions her upbringing in Groveland quite a bit — and why not? The town not only helped shape the person she is today, but it’s also where she met her husband and some friends she still speaks with on a more-than-regular basis.

“Groveland might have been the smallest town on the planet, but to me as I was growing up it was the center of the universe,” she says.

Stephanos fondly remembers the countless days she spent as a youngster at Cedardale/Groveland Outing Center, where she baby-sat younger kids and played tennis. Groveland is where she went to Elmer S. Bagnall Elementary School with Jane Khantzian, whose father was best friends with Maria’s dad. The two girls

were introduced to each other when they were 5 years old, and they went on to form a sectional-champion doubles tandem on the Pentucket Regional High School girls' tennis team. Today, they have kids the same age (their second children were born on the same day) and their families are quite close.

Pentucket Junior High School is where Maria met a quiet kid named Dale Stephanos, who had moved into town from Swampscott. The two quickly became an item and went on to marry and have two children.

"In high school, you couldn't say 'Maria' without saying 'Maria and Dale,'" says Maria's friend Jane Khantzian, now Jane Wolbach. "They were a fixture."

Part of the couple's regular routine was to walk more than 2½ miles from Stephanos' house to Carter's Ice Cream in Haverhill.

"I'm not even sure what we talked about," Stephanos says with a laugh. "But I'm sure that I did most of the talking and he just listened. That's how it still is today."

The Stephanos home in Groveland is also where Maria and her sister learned at a young age that being polite and courteous was a requirement, not a request. Their parents were loving, but strict. Stephanos answered the telephone not with a "Hello," but by saying, "Hello, may I help you? This is Maria speaking."

The kitchen on Seven Star Road was where Stephanos learned how to cook, and food is still an important part of her life today.

"Cooking for people is a way for me to express my love," Stephanos says affectionately. "And I love to eat."

"She's like a little old Greek lady from the old country when she's in the kitchen," says Wolbach, who lives in Groveland with her husband and three kids. "One time, Dale said to me that the worst thing you can say about Maria is that she'll kill you with kindness and then send you home with a lot of food. That pretty much sums her up."

After graduating from Pentucket High in 1984 and Emerson College in Boston in 1989, Stephanos got her first real taste of covering a beat when a local radio station hired her to report on the Massachusetts State House. But Stephanos' future was in television. She worked for the Lowell cable TV station long enough to put together a resume tape, and eventually was hired as a reporter at WJAR-TV in Providence.

One night, the wife of the station's sports anchor had a baby, and Stephanos got the call to fill in. She admits she had no idea

what she was doing, but viewers in the Providence area got an early dose that night of "Maria being Maria."

"I was reading a story about a Yankees game and I looked right into the camera and said, 'Ugh, I can't stand the Yankees,'" Stephanos remembers with a huge laugh. "Hey, I was just being honest. And people loved it."

Ward was working at WJAR at the time, and he remembers pulling Stephanos aside one day soon after her anchor desk debut.

"I told her she was going places and to just stick with it," he says. "It was just so apparent that the camera loved her. When the light went on, another side of her came across. She really connected with the people."

Stephanos has continued to "connect" with the people of the

Boston area ever since she took over as lead anchor of the Fox 25 nightly news in April of 2002. Since then, the station has gone from a relative unknown on the local news scene to a major player.

"Maria has been vital to the success of FOX 25 News. She's one of the hardest working and most energetic people in the newsroom," says Lisa Hall, vice president and news director at Fox 25. "Her consistent approach of hard work, perseverance and determination has made her a leader in the newsroom and trusted anchor to New Englanders."

In June, after the 10 p.m. Fox news was ranked No. 1 in the ratings for adults 18-49 in 35 out of 40 months, the station announced that it was jumping in with the market's big boys by beginning its newscast at 11 p.m. By the end of September it was the #1 rated late news in the market in all key demographics.

"We're excited about it," says Stephanos, who concedes that the national networks have "flirted" with her, but that she has not yet considered a move to a bigger stage. "I'm really proud of how we have scratched our way to the top. It's nice to know that I've been a part of helping build this station from the ground up."

As the ratings at Fox 25 have soared over the years, so has Stephanos' star. And while some celebrities consider it a nuisance to be stopped by strangers, Stephanos embraces it.

"I never get sick of it," she says. "I mean, who wouldn't want people to come up to them and say, 'Hey, I love watching you on the news. You're doing a great job.' Even when they say, 'Wow. Your nose is a lot bigger in person,' I still love it."

"And you know why? Because it means that when I'm anchoring,



Maria and her husband used to walk to Carter's Ice cream in Haverhill regularly, and still visit there whenever in the area.

the people at home see something that makes me seem approachable. And to me, that's the ultimate compliment."

But the celebrity status does come with a price. Her looks are one of the reasons she's a big hit with the male audience, but sometimes the Internet chatter can go too far. For that reason, Stephanos is guarded when speaking publicly about her husband and kids. She declined our request to interview Dale for this story.

"I think because Maria is so giving and such a great person she has to be very careful about her private life," Wolbach says. "I can understand why people are fascinated by her. I see what the whole world sees. She's sexy and charismatic. She's always been like that. But there's a lot more to Maria than that. She's smart. She's true. She's got an incredible zest for life. She's an amazing person."

Though Stephanos is protective of family members, she by no means shelters them. She does everything in her power to live a "normal" life, even if it means sneaking out of the Fox 25 studios between newscasts to catch five minutes of her daughter's soccer game or to attend a parent-teacher conference with an earpiece dangling off the side of her head.

Her hours can present a challenge for her family life at times, but despite getting home each night after midnight, Stephanos, who doesn't drink coffee or alcohol, is awake every morning by 7 a.m. to go over homework assignments with her kids, Isabella, 11, and Liam, 9. After she gets the kids off to school, she goes for a 5-mile run, a ritual she has reluctantly made part of her workday routine.



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"I hate it, but I do it, and I do it every day," she says with pride. "It doesn't matter if it's snowing or raining or if it's 100 degrees or whether it's 5 degrees. I still get out there. Nothing stops me."

Stephanos — who finished the 2004 Boston Marathon, but insists her marathon days are over — says her "twisted taste" in music helps get her through the run each day.

"I listen to everything," she says. "I have some Bach and some Beethoven. But I also absolutely love thrash metal. I'm a big fan of Rage Against The Machine and Led Zeppelin. I love the craziness of my iPod."

After her run, Stephanos reads the newspapers and begins getting into TV mode before making the 12-minute ride to Dedham from her home south of Boston. The long hours are much more manageable because Dale is a work-at-home father. The 45-year-old illustrator's work appears regularly in Rolling Stone, Newsweek, Mad Magazine and Golf Digest.

"He's the one you should be doing a story on," Maria says in a serious tone. "He's incredible at what he does."

The balancing act between work and family isn't easy for the Stephanos family, but they more than make it work.

"I'm not around 24/7. So the time we do have together as a family, we make the most of it," says Maria, who typically cooks enough food over the weekend to provide meals for the entire week ahead.

"I love being around my kids and seeing them live their lives," she says. "If I had a choice of going on a private yacht for an afternoon or to watch my son's baseball game, I'm at the baseball game, no questions asked, even if it's a three-hour game in the rain. I'm at peace when I can sit there with the other parents and watch my kids."

"Raising those two kids is the best thing I have ever done in my life — not my job, not interviewing the president or getting great ratings," she continues. "My career is important to me and I love what I do. But my parents taught me that family is what's most important. I'm thankful every day that I have not only a great job that I love very much, but a family I'm even more proud of."



A typical day for Maria at Fox25 News: (Left to right) Recording a voice over; researching a story; announcing the news at 5:00, 5:30, 10:00 & 11:00p.m. in solo segments and also with fellow anchor Mark Ockerbloom and Chief Meteorologist Kevin Lemanowicz.