

THE WOMAN WHO CREATED THE SUPERMODEL



To her competitors, **Eileen Ford** was a monster; to her models, she was a mother figure. Tim Teeman meets the 89-year-old New Yorker who changed the face of fashion

PORTRAIT Erik Madigan Heck



Opposite: Eileen Ford at her daughter Katie's home in New York. This page: Ford models in 1966

Eileen Ford is approaching 90 in a resolutely uncuddly mood: she rolls her eyes at the notion of mortality, derides “tear-jerking” questions and notes, of the radiation she has had to treat a brain tumour, that she had great fun teaching the hospital staff to jitterbug. Her toughness isn’t icy, merely practical, brisk. She is scornful of pat sentimentality. Ford loves, and is loved and cherished in return, by her three daughters, son, eight grandchildren and four great-grandchildren: she calls them “marvellous human beings” and lists their sterling qualities and achievements, such as daughter Katie’s campaign against human trafficking. But Ford, who with husband Jerry founded the famous Ford modelling agency in 1946 and helped usher in the era of the supermodel, doesn’t do soft and fuzzy.

She and Jerry ran Ford until Katie took over as CEO in 1995 (it was sold to Stone Tower Equity Partners in 2007; Katie remains on the board of directors). In their time, Eileen and Jerry, who died in 2008, represented some of the world’s best-known models, Christy Turlington, Jean Shrimpton, Naomi Campbell, Jerry Hall, Kim Basinger, Ali MacGraw, Candice Bergen and Suzy Parker among them.

However, although many of the models lived with her, Ford doesn’t seem a clucking mother hen. She dismisses criticism of the modelling industry: women’s body images and eating disorders are not hers or magazines’ responsibilities, she insists. Of the era of the supermodel, she says, “It came because we made it come. We built them up and the best models build themselves. Most of the good ones have business savvy. If I were a young model, say like Kate Moss or any of the others who have a business going, I would make the money and quit. I’d just run.” She laughs. “Why drag it out? There’s no reason.”

In Katie’s New York apartment, working through a plate of peanut butter sandwiches, Ford is dressed in a fitted Escada jacket, multihued Louis Féraud shirt and black slacks; her hair is freshly coiffed into a wispy helmet. She will mark her 90th birthday on March 25 with a dinner thrown for her by her ex-son-in-law Andre Bálazs at the Standard Hotel, New York, which he owns. She seems frail; post-radiation, she walks with a stroller and she says she’s having a second hearing aid fitted, costing “several thousand dollars”. Is that frustrating for her? “No,” she says in her wry, commanding voice. “I have ancient ears. There’s nothing I can do about it. I’m pretty flexible and adaptable. I think it’s more frustrating for everyone else I keep saying, ‘Whaaaaat?’ to.”

One of each of her children was with her throughout the radiation, she says proudly, noting the family’s closeness. “I’m pragmatic.



‘I liked taking care of the models, taking them to the Metropolitan Museum. For us, modelling wasn’t just a business, it was love’

If it’s gotta be, it’s gotta be. I had the tumour before, had it operated on. It grew back. They can’t remove it all the way.” X-rays carried out once every three weeks chart the tumour’s size and progression. Does it make her think about her mortality? “No, I don’t really think about the future.” She chuckles. “It’s a good thing I don’t; I’d be sorely disappointed to find I was wrong. What good does thinking about death do? I’m an Aries. I don’t look back. I don’t contemplate things about me. I’ve spent my adult life thinking about doing things for other people and it gets to be a habit. I was married two months short of 65 years to the most handsome man. He was so nice and good.”



Clockwise from top left: Jerry and Eileen Ford, 1948; Ford tends Sandra Nelson’s blisters, 1948; Christy Turlington, 1993; Naomi Campbell, 1990; with Anita Ekberg, 1951

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Does she miss Jerry? “Yes, but it doesn’t do any good to sit around and moan. Nobody wants to see that. If when people asked how you were, you said [she puts on a pathetic voice], ‘Oh, I’m sad,’ you wouldn’t have any friends at all. The only thing I talk about sadly is when a tree falls down in the garden or something breaks in the house.” Depression “is not part of my nature. Of course, I’ve cried, but I’m more likely to cry at the movies. I’d even cry at Mickey Mouse. How can anyone be luckier than I am? It was a really great marriage. We were lucky to work together; we raised our children together, ate meals with our models. They were like our children.”

Naomi Campbell lived with you, I say. “She left us several times. I wouldn’t let her smoke. I read about her now and it seems her life is turning out the way she wanted.” Ford had house rules for the girls. “When they wanted to go out, I had to approve who they were with, where they were going, how long they would be gone.” She smiles. “But it wasn’t like we had a bunch of screaming maniacs trying to break the door down.”

Does she think models today are unhealthy; are they taken care of properly? “Well, quite frankly, there’s never going to be another me. Not everybody wants to do what I liked doing, which was taking care of them, feeding them, taking them to the Metropolitan Museum for evening classes. It was a joy to see them developing as my children were developing. For us, modelling wasn’t just a business, it was love – and we loved those models.”

And they looked after them. From its early days, Ford created a five-day work week for its models, paying their fees, less the agency’s 10 per cent cut, every Friday, later recouping the fees from its clients. On Jerry’s death, *The New York Times* reported its first star models, Dorian Leigh and Mary Jane Russell, were earning \$3,500 a week by the mid-Fifties; Suzy Parker (Leigh’s sister) and Jean Patchett were Ford’s other leading models of the era. “Before Jerry came along, there were only robber barons who were out there running modelling schools,” Carmen Dell’Orefice told the paper.

When it negotiated Lauren Hutton’s contract with Revlon in 1974, the first contract for a model to represent a specific brand, Ford set the bar for significantly higher fees for models, leading to the kinds of astronomical sums (Gisele Bündchen made an estimated \$25 million in 2009) models earn today. In

1981, Eileen initiated the first Ford Supermodel of the World award, won by Annette Stai (the annual competition continues today). “My income surpassed my dad’s in my first year of modelling – and my dad made a good living,” Turlington once said of her earnings, and in 1990 Linda Evangelista famously said of herself and Turlington, “We don’t wake up for less than \$10,000 a day.”

With such large sums of money at stake, fierce battling for models broke out between the leading agencies – Ford, Wilhelmina and John Casablancas’s Elite – entertainingly and eye-poppingly reported in Michael Gross’s 1995 book, *Model*. Elite and Ford became particularly bitter rivals. Jerry said Casablancas’s methods were “sleazy. I don’t respect him.” “I will never sleep with both eyes closed as long as that woman is around,” Casablancas once said of Eileen. And in another interview: “What gets me is the permanent, ever-present nastiness of Eileen Ford. She is Machiavellian and Byzantine. She is like a snake with seven heads: cut off six and she still has one left to bite you.”

Of Casablancas, Ford tells me, “We certainly never became friends. He’s ill with cancer now and I’m very sorry about that. He has a wife and children. You don’t wish that on anyone.”

Modelling and magazines promoting skinny models are charged with encouraging eating disorders, I say. “I read some girl said she was going to start a modelling union,” Ford says. “I’ve heard that crud so many times. They’re never going to protect models. Models don’t need that kind of protection anyway. Carmen [Dell’Orefice, 80, still modelling and a close friend of Ford’s] is a great example. She weighs the same thing, measures inch for inch what she has always measured. Models are made that way. I said to some girls when they came in, ‘You have to go away and come back when you’re ten pounds lighter.’ But the only time I remember a model becoming really anorexic was when she went to Milan and was told by someone to drink club soda; she got so thin she had to come home and be put in hospital.”

Other models have become ill, died; images of unhealthily thin women are a recurring focus of debate, I say. “The press has to write about something,” Ford says dismissively. “When they run out of saying how great-looking models are, they say how terrible-looking they are.” She adds sharply, “I’m not raising the world. Do I have responsibilities? ➔

Does *Vogue* have responsibilities? No, we don't. If they're young, where are their mother and father? Why don't Mummy and Daddy feed them properly? Why should a whole business assume responsibility for a job that absolutely in my mind belongs to the parent? I raised my children. I worked 24 hours a day. I'd come home, make sure their homework was done, say goodnight and go out, maybe come home at 4 in the morning. I don't regret one minute."

So, models aren't unhealthy or encouraging others to be unhealthy? "No. There was a big flap in Spain about it: they said they wouldn't book models, but of course they did – how else are they going to sell clothes and make-up? Models are what they were born as. Look at pictures from the Fifties and Sixties. Their arms and legs are the same as today. What's different are the lips. I don't know what they're doing to them today." She laughs mischievously.

Spoilt rotten growing up on Long Island, Ford recalls, "As far as my father was concerned, heaven had sent me. I could do no wrong." If a bad report about her came from school, her father blamed the teachers. Ford first wanted to become a film star or big-band singer, "to sing like Ella Fitzgerald, dance like Ginger Rogers... Clark Gable was for ever Rhett Butler in my presence. I don't know how many times I saw *Gone with the Wind*." She laughs, adds archly: "I can't understand how my talent lay undiscovered."

Her mother wanted her to become a lawyer, but Ford's life changed in 1944 when she started dating Jerry, whom she "plotted to meet" at a dance two weeks after encountering him by chance in a bar popular with midshipmen in New York (he was in the Navy at the time). "It was what the French call a *coup de foudre*," she says. They married the same year. A career in pro football beckoned for him, but as they prepared to have their first child, daughter Jamie, Ford began taking bookings for model friends she had met as an assistant to a photographer. It was a fledgling job, let alone business, but the pair pursued it.

In two years, with the help of two friends who mortgaged their homes for the Fords, it became one of the most successful modelling businesses in the US. "I don't know what I saw in the models," says Ford. "I never knew. I always said it was an X factor. They just had it."

There was no conflict between career and motherhood, says Ford. "My mother worked. I was never going to stay at home and be a mother – I never even thought about it." How did they run the agency? "Jerry ran the agency. I was good at selling and picking the models."

Did she see any of them develop eating disorders or drug addiction? "When drugs came along the main thing was marijuana. As far as I knew musicians took modern drugs like cocaine, but it has to have been there and it has to have been that I simply chose

to ignore it. I don't know." She says none of her girls got sick "with a real addiction, just marijuana. Look, it isn't just models, it's young people. At my son's boarding school, he told us you could get any drug except heroin. It isn't just any place, it's every place."

She says that Studio 54, the legendary, star-drenched New York hotspot where Bianca Jagger once paraded on the dancefloor riding a white horse, became a "problem – if Jerry and I didn't go there we would be out, yesterday's mashed potatoes". She laughs. "How do you like seeing waiters running around naked, men making love to each other on the balcony? It wasn't exactly my dream. Before that we'd go to see Benny Goodman and Glenn Miller."

It sounds a great marriage, but it wasn't without its stresses. I read that Jerry threatened to leave Ford because she was too bossy. Ford says today, "He made it very clear that if he was to stay he was going to be boss, and so I learnt early in the marriage I'd better shut up, or it wouldn't have lasted."

She seems assertive, I say: was that suppression hard? "I don't remember, but it must have been. I have a marvellous memory:

woman does the same, "she is tough". She sighs. "What on Earth are you supposed to do if you happen to be born a woman and run a company, be a mother and run three homes at the same time? I dealt with each piece." That bracing pragmatism again.

Does Ford, who lives in Oldwick, New Jersey, miss the business? "Not. At. All." Why so emphatic? "Because it's so nice to embrace the flowers. I worked and had what I thought was a wonderful life. Why should I want anything more?"

Does she mind ageing? "Look in the mirror someday in 20 years and tell me what you think," she says drily. "Of course you mind it. So long as you're mentally alert and physically in good shape you can't ask for a heck of a lot more, except if you knew a plastic surgeon maybe..." She smiles mischievously.

She hasn't had plastic surgery, then? "I'm sorry I didn't do it, because then I wouldn't have a jowl," she says, smiling. So she's been tempted? "Oh yes. It's very expensive, though." But she's got the money. "I didn't think I did. It isn't that I didn't want to do it, I just never got around to it. I recently went to a plastic

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it eliminates what I don't want to remember. I'm not sure that it was easy, but let me tell you: if your very life and future are at stake, it's not hard." I ask, did Jerry actually say, "You're becoming too bossy. I will not stay in this marriage if you continue like this"? Ford says, "Well, you're dramatising it word for word, but that is precisely what he said."

I had seen references to Jerry having an affair with a model, Barbara Mullen, and ask Ford gently about it. She says she never talks about it, that it was long ago. "I have children and great-grandchildren and I am not going to drag them into whatever filth some newspaper wants to write." I'm not doing that, I say, merely posing a question, then ask how the marriage endured. "If people say to me, 'How do you stay married that long?' I say, 'He's gotta be Tarzan, he's gotta be King Kong, he's gotta be boss.' That's it."

Again, Ford's assertiveness and aura of power seem at a variance with this willing marital submission. "I can't say I'm not strong. I don't know how many pieces of me there are. I was a mother, housewife, businesswoman. It was so many different things all at the same time." When men make good decisions in business, they're "geniuses", she says; if a

surgeon and she said, 'At your age you would need a general anaesthetic and I don't think you should try that.'" Ford laughs. "If a plastic surgeon turns down money it must be true."

Has Ford thought about the possibility of love again? "What? Me?" She looks horrified. "He's only been dead three years." She smiles. "I can't say 'no', because you never know. A friend said it would be nice to have a warm body in bed next to you." In the country outside New York, where she lives, another friend, "who is prone to exaggerate", says there are 65 women to every man.

Ford apologises for the peanut butter specks on her slacks ("These days you always know what I had for dinner"), then says again how handsome Jerry was as a young man: "When I saw him at 19, it was a shock." Then she puts on a vivid red raincoat and an even more fabulous red fireman's rain hat.

The next day Ford calls to say how upset she was by the affair question. I apologise if I upset her, but say it was asked sensitively. Neither of us is in the mood for retreat. Then she says how much she loves *Judge Judy*. Do I? It's a guilty pleasure, I admit. She laughs merrily. Steel and charm, ruthlessly deployed: that's how Eileen Ford made supermodels. ■