

Written by Patricia Turnier
Monday, 20 February 2012 21:25



[Jeannie Mai](#) (born January 4, 1980) wears many hats. She is an American makeup artist, fashion expert, actress and TV personality. The eldest of three children, Mrs. Mai and her two younger brothers grew up in San Jose, California. She is the daughter of an immigrant father from Vietnam and mother from China. She identifies herself as an *afro-mexicasian* because she grew up on the east side of San Jose where all her friends were African-Americans, Hispanics and [Asians](#). She once declared to the media that she feels at home whenever she is around these ethnicities. Besides English, she speaks Vietnamese. In her early life, Mrs. Mai was a member of a family of 16 living under the same roof. It included her extended family (aunts, uncles...). This experience helped to shape her and to learn about the gift of sharing. It also allowed her to develop communication skills, an invaluable asset for a future career. Mrs. Mai has a sparkling, spunky and feisty personality. Mrs. Mai began to entertain people around her at an early age using her mother's makeup to prepare herself before pretending to interview her family members. Later, at age 18 she launched her career as a makeup artist for MAC

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Cosmetics while still living in San Jose. As a trainee, she worked her way up from face to face until she was eventually traveling the world to do make up work with a roster of celebrity clients such as Christina Aguilera, Alicia Keys and Rosario Dawson. Mrs. Mai also worked with other prominent people such as Sarah Jessica Parker and Jennifer Aniston. She has served as a celebrity makeup stylist for MTV, TRL, KCL Los Angeles, and Good Morning Sacramento.

In 2003, Mai began auditioning for local television networks with self-written scripts to demonstrate her unique hosting talents. She landed a gig co-hosting the Emmy-nominated [Asian American](#)

Magazine-Style show "Stir," on International Channel Networks. Not long after, the San Francisco local music channel, CMC, invited her to be the first female VJ to host her own music countdown. After attracting attention for her energetic personality and knack for style, Mai became an entertainment reporter and producer of the WB's "Daily Mixx." In 2005, Mai got her first prime time hosting role on "Character Fantasy" on the USA Network where she inspired guests each week to live their fantasies. Soon after, she appeared on MTV's "Granted" alongside Frankie Muniz and hosted various segments related to fashion and entertainment news on networks such as E!, Lifetime, TLC, and NBC.

In 2008, Mai took part in TV history's first ever attempt to reinvent Miss America's 52 hopefuls on TLC's "Miss America Reality Check." In addition, she starred in "Dude, Where's Your Style", a Style special turning men from cute to couture and toured the world as the official spokesperson of Never Accept Ordinary -- NAOCosmetics.com --, a brand of cosmetics that promotes individuality through color.

In 2009, Mrs. Mai took over as host of the Style Network's popular and Emmy-nominated show "How Do I Look?" It is recognized as more than just a "makeover show," which empowers women to discover their true beauty, overcome their insecurities and employ fashion to achieve their career goals. Moreover, she served as a correspondent and weekend host on NBC's "Extra TV" with Mario Lopez.

Mrs. Mai is recognized as an important advocate for women's empowerment. She spoke at Maria Shriver's *The Women's Conference* immediately after other well-known celebrities such as Donna Karan, Jessica Simpson and Jane Fonda. Due to her commitment to teaching women the "power of wardrobe", she is an active supporter of charitable causes such as *Seven Bar to Dress for Success*

. She also frequently hosts events like "Hope in the City: Creating Fashion to Spark Creativity". She also emceed the "2010 Women in Telecommunications (WICT) LEA Awards" which honours women in that domain. Mai employs her recognition as a

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fashionista

to promote fledgling female designers and entrepreneurs from around the world by wearing their designs on air and on the red carpet. As a fashion expert, she strongly believes that style and wardrobe can have an empowering and healing effect on a woman's confidence and mood. Rather than focusing on trends or labels, she likes to teach how color and textures in personal wardrobe choices can dramatically enhance a woman's self-confidence and mood, while transforming the environment around her.

Currently, Mrs. Mai is a speaker for the American Program Bureau. She is best known for her work as the host of Style Network's "How Do I Look?" and USA's "Character Fantasy". As a fashion expert, she is often featured on numerous television programs such as NBC's Today Show on the "Fashion Tips Today" segment, Extra TV, and E! News The Daily 10. She serves as a style expert for Perez Hilton's hit fashion website, CocoPerez.com, which has an audience of brings in over nine million visitors per month. She also shared her story in the popular book series *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. In addition, she promoted companies such as Avon, The Limited, David's Bridal and Yoplait. She has been featured in a wide variety of popular publications, such as

US Weekly, OK! Magazine, Glamour, Teen Vogue, Elle, Allure, Essence, Today's Black Woman Magazine

and
Ebony

, to name a few. In fall 2011 she had the great opportunity to co-host the Miss Universe Pageant in Brazil. The 60th anniversary of the spectacle was held at the Credicard Hall, in São Paulo and was telecast live September 13th. Ximena Navarrete of Mexico crowned her successor Leila Lopes.

Mrs. Mai has been engaged in several philanthropic causes around the world, her first being a trip to Maputo (Mozambique) in 2005. She also frequently visits Asia (Thailand and Vietnam) to help impoverished children and women through organizations such as Heartbeat Vietnam, where she travelled to support a family and their six-year old daughter, Be Ha, who was receiving a new heart. Home in the United States, she actively sustains organizations fighting heart disease. In her speeches, she combines her upbeat delivery with personal stories of hope and triumph. In the United States, Mrs. Mai served as the keynote speaker at events such as the Freedom & Fashion Runway Show, which raises awareness in the fight against human trafficking, and the Susan G. Komen/Diane von Furstenberg fundraising gala to combat breast cancer. In spring 2011, she hosted the Go Red for Women Luncheon in Charlotte, N.C., to raise funds to battle heart disease. Jeannie Mai, a liberal Christian, has set up a Prayer Box in Runyon Canyon where hikers are asked to leave a personal prayer and take another that has been left in the box. Using the term "pray it forward," the box encourages visitors to open their eyes to the prayers of others and share their own as an expression of faith, hope and love. Thoroughly spiritual, Mai attributes her faith to the success she has achieved. She and husband Freddy share humorous stories about how they discovered the power of love. They have grown to respect and honor each other in their marriage. She attributes her commitment to celibacy as

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a major factor in building a healthy relationship with her husband, and shares her story at events such as RespectRX, which celebrates those that practice celibacy before marriage. *Meg a Diversities spoke to her last fall.* Mrs. Mai was very generous with her time and granted us an interview very early in the morning, a testament of her work ethic. Here she shared the experiences of her professional journey.



PATRICIA TURNIER TALKS TO JEANNIE MAI:

P.T. How old were you when you discovered you had a passion for fashion and makeup?

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J.M. I would say my very first moment that I understood the power and the persuasion of fashion, I was about 6-years-old [Laughs].

P.T. This is pretty young!

J.M. Yes, definitely. I was very blessed to find my calling at such a young age. There are adults who still don't know what they want to do with their lives and some will never find out what is their labor of love or what they are best suited to do. I was inspired as a child by my mother who always took pride in her appearance through her style. She always used her image as a way to stand out. Her culture was palpable in her fashion. It was important for her to send the message that you didn't have to assimilate to the American culture to fit in. She embraced her own Asian identity and people respected her. My mother taught me that style is something that you have which cannot be bought. It goes beyond the makeup, the hairstyle and so on. It is about how you carry yourself with your own personality and identity. I understood also the power of color. I learned how to use the right one which fits the energy that I want to exude. For instance, my first day in school my mom asked me what color I wished to use which would showcase my pride. I remembered that red, white and blue made me feel good about myself, so we chose these colors and textures.

I consider myself today as a *wearapist* which is my trademark. It is a psychology of style or it is like being a therapist in clothing. My goal is to make people feel good about themselves through fashion. If my client wants to appear fearless or confident in the way he/she presents him/herself, I will be instrumental in helping this person to choose the right attire which will transmit this. I work with people from different domains. Some need my advice to get a promotion in their field, etc.

Appearing confident is possible for everybody regardless of the mark you are wearing. A lot of it has to do with the attitude you are transmitting. This was a learning process in terms of fashion since I was a 6-year-old. At such a young age, you are fearless and you don't necessarily care about people judging you for what you are wearing. My mother really taught me how to have a personality and be proud of it while showing it through my clothes: pink made me feel very girly, feminine and accomplished; white was about a restart, a birth of something new, etc. Early on, I learned that color transmits powerful emotions. It is a reflection of yourself and it is also about how other people see you. My job is to help my clientele choose the right clothes which will show a positive outlook about them.

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P.T. What about makeup? I doubt that you started wearing it at six years old!

J.M. [Laughs] You know, it is funny, but my mom didn't have rules with makeup. She encouraged me to wear very young. I never learned that I had to use it to make myself prettier. I never heard comments such as I had to put some powder because my skin is too pale or you have dark circles under your eyes so put something to conceal them. However, if I had a dance performance at school my mother asked what makeup I wanted to wear to make sure that I would stand out. My mom made sure that I didn't put too much makeup and ensured that it was age appropriate. I learned how to use accessories with my makeup and my clothes while making sure that I wasn't overdoing it.

P.T. It is widely known that Asians value college degrees (the statistics speak for themselves) and favor a liberal profession, often in science. Some Asian celebrities in the entertainment business shared with the media the difficulties they encountered in their community when they chose an artistic road. When you made your choice to be involved in the entertainment industry, did you receive support from your people or you had to convince them that you were going to make it?

J.M. [Silence] I absolutely received negative feedback from my family at the beginning. I understand where they were coming from because it was very difficult for them to leave Vietnam and come here. I totally comprehend that they wanted me to have something stable by going to college. They didn't want me to suffer from economic deprivation. I had to convince my parents that they had to trust me and to set me free.

I don't want to sound like I am stereotyping Asians, but a lot of my people highly value education and we excel in math, accounting and so on. Others become lawyers or embrace a liberal profession. For my part, I knew that my natural talent was in the communication field. It is my passion and I love to make people feel amazing. That's my formula. So when I was younger, I knew I had what it takes to make it in the fashion industry, but at the time this field was not highly credited as much as now. We live today in a world where image is very important in many domains, it goes beyond the entertainment field. A politician has to present himself well, an author also, and so on. The first impressions count and people see how you look before you even start to talk. They assess you in every way. The container and the content count. We live in a world of image more than ever.

To go back to your question, when I made the decision that the fashion field was my path, my

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parents were really worried. Asians are very proud and honor is important. They don't talk easily about their pitfalls. I was ready to face hurdles and my parents had to learn to trust me that I would overcome any obstacles. It was not easy (there were moments when I didn't have a stable income...) but they had to understand. I was ready to face hurdles and I wanted to follow my heart. So, in the 90s I took the money that I had left in the bank, it was \$238, and I moved to LA.

P.T. This was a very bold move. Not many people would be willing to do this. Some, for security, even prefer to relinquish their dreams by staying in a job which makes them miserable. You pursued your passion and not your pension. The decision you took shows how confident you are in setting goals that some might find impossible to achieve.

J.M. Thanks. It was the right choice for me. So, obviously I skipped college. I went to De Anza College for one year. I tried it for one semester, but there was no field for what I wanted to do which was being a TV host. The only domain which was the closest to what I was aiming for was in broadcasting, but it wasn't what I specifically wished to do. Then, I dropped out of school to do what I excel in, which is in the fashion realm. However, even if I don't have a college diploma, I educate myself on a regular basis and I am aware that knowledge is power. I do not recommend it for everybody to not have a college or university degree. For my part, I had to teach myself the business but I realize also that earning a degree would have been a great asset.

P.T. Did you have a mentor in your realm, if not, who inspired you?

J.M. I didn't have a mentor growing up, specifically in the fashion industry. Nevertheless, my mom was one of my greatest inspirations. She taught me that having style is about standing out. My mom encouraged me to not emulate anyone in my way of dressing and to be proud of my uniqueness. I thank her for teaching me the connection between pride in your appearance and personal success as early as my first day of school. I believe that the relationship between a mother and a daughter is one of the most important in life.

In addition, when I first saw the Oprah Winfrey Show, I was about nine-years-old. I remember it like it was yesterday. Her show was about four females who were complaining about their lives. They didn't have a mate and a satisfying job. The expert involved on the show focused on how to dress for success to get the career you really want and to attract the right people in their

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lives. This program made me realize more about the power of styling and the power of television. I was amazed to see that in one hour it was possible to teach millions of people and the four women on the show how to change their lives. Television is one the most powerful mediums to transmit hope to women. As a kid, I was impressed and it was a defining moment for me.

Later in my life, I found God, Jesus, and since then I take my inspiration from him. It helped me to make the right decisions and to be guided. I found strength through the Bible, my mentor. I believed that it made me stronger because I didn't rely on someone but on my faith which is infallible and keeps me grounded. Spiritually, I really pursued my career because I realized everyone is given life to bring purpose. In addition, Dave Gibbons, a pastor from the church, New Song, is a mentor of mine who guides me. His church is predominantly Asian. He helped so many leaders in our community. He is involved in the organization Xealot where people have to embrace their pitfalls, learn from them and go forward in life. I love that and it is inspiring for me. I started at the bottom in the industry. I also learned how to hustle as a teenager on my own. I worked in different venues doing makeup. This gave me the drive to go further in life.



P.T. What obstacles have you encountered so far in your career and how did you overcome them?

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J.M. I learned that it is important to not rely on or expect anything from other people. You can only be responsible for yourself. My life motto is to expect nothing and appreciate everything. If you do something for someone, do not decide to do it because you expect something in return. It has to come from the bottom of your heart. This principle helped me in LA. My obstacles at the beginning were when I did something for a person and I thought he/she would be grateful to help me also in the future. Things do not always work like that and you have to be strong to deal with it. You do something good for the betterment of your character. Otherwise, you can become bitter which is a deterrent to success.

When I arrived in LA, I was so trusting and helped so many people. I did it with the intention to have something in return. This was my fault and I assume complete responsibility. This was a lesson. The other obstacle was to not allow the voices of other people to get into my head. I mean not permitting negative influences to infiltrate my mind and soul. When I came to LA, television hosting was still something very new in the 90s. In addition, there were no Asians. So, you have to be strong and not be discouraged by it. I needed to stay hopeful and continue believing that it was possible to make it in the industry. I remember some people used to tell me when I was on camera that they would not be sure that viewers would relate to me since I was Asian because they might not be open-minded.

P.T. I believe that usually when people give negative comments of this nature it is because of their own insecurities or fears and often it is because they see the potential of the person that they are criticizing. However, when someone is young you do not necessarily realize that and it can be intimidating when you hear these kind of comments from older and experienced people. You need to be really resilient.

J.M. Absolutely! For a few moments in my life, the negative comments of the naysayers really got to me and I was questioning if I was in the right field, especially when I observed a scarcity of Asians at the time. Nonetheless, I found the inner strength to not give in. It was helpful to remember what my mom used to say regarding the importance of standing out. I spoke to myself and told myself that I do stand out since I am one of the few Asians in the industry. I was convinced that I had a lot to bring to the table. I realized also that my presence in the media was important because it has to reflect the diversity of the American population and bring different perspectives.

P.T. You worked for stars such as Alicia Keys and Christina Aguilera. How did you create a solid network and a rapid rise which led you to work with the top people in the

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American show business industry?

J.M. I was very blessed. Honestly, in this industry it is not always about talent. Talent will obviously get you there and favor longevity in your career. Preparation also is imperative because some people find excellent opportunities but they were not ready for them. Beside talent and preparation, networking and timing are very important. In the past, I worked for a man called Crazy Horst in San Francisco as a makeup artist. I approached Mac Cosmetic and my experience with Horst was instrumental. Mac Cosmetic believed in me and saw my talent. My mantra always has been about aiming for the job you want and not the job you have. I made people know about my contribution (in training the staff, issuing new ideas, giving advice about making more profits for the company and so on) and this is how I worked my way to the top which allowed me to develop professional relationships with Cyndi Lauper, Alicia Keys, etc. I never settle and I always have a next goal. This is how I push myself. I have a very strong work ethic and I make sure that all my e-mails coming from professionals or fans are answered. I love to respond to them. To finish, I take daily a moment for myself where I am alone. It helps me feel revitalized, transformed and renewed. In other words, it is a way to recharge my batteries because you cannot be in action constantly. You need to give back to yourself.

P.T. What has been your proudest moment in your career so far, and why?

J.M. [Silence] I don't perceive my situation as I made it because as I said earlier I never settle. In addition, for my entire life I want my main accomplishment to be about inspiring females to fulfill their dreams. On a more personal level, I always wanted to take my entire family on a trip without having to worry about expenditures. I plan to do it for the upcoming Holidays. I am taking them to Jamaica. It will be huge for me because my parents have never been outside of the U.S., except for Vietnam.

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Exclusive Interview With One Of The Biggest Asian-American Fashion And Style Experts: Jeannie Mai

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<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=31b9005e4TbM>