

HEART to heart

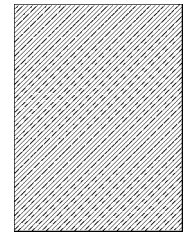
EXCLUSIVE  
INTERVIEW

**DONNA MILLS**

*Live*  
**YOUR  
DREAMS**

*The Knots Landing alum  
talks about her life's journey  
and her return to television*

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Page 1 of 4



Donna (with Michele Lee and Joan Van Ark) played Abby Cunningham on *Knots Landing* from 1980 to 1989.



She and her partner, Larry Gilman, have been together since 2001.

**D**onna Mills doesn't just wish for things — she makes them happen! "I guess the best thing about being my age is that you know you have a limited amount of time left," the *Knots Landing* alum, 82, tells *Closer*. "You have to really decide what you want to do with it." When Donna set her sights on a return to acting, she jumped right in. She's currently playing mysterious Lillian Cutler in the four-part limited series *V.C. Andrews' Dawn*, airing on Lifetime. "Once I knew I got this role, I immediately started to read [the books]," says Donna. "The storytelling is so good."

**Is it true that you started out as a dancer?**

Yes, I wanted to be a dancer from the time I was 5 years old. I started ballet classes, and I just loved it. I'm the kind of person who enjoys doing something physical — that makes me happier than doing something mental. I was never good at math. I did OK in school, but not great. But anything that I had to do physically, I was always much better at it. Physical stuff just makes me feel better than anything else.

**When did you decide to try acting?**

I was in Chicago, and there weren't any dancing jobs to audition for, but there was a play. I had never taken any acting classes, but I auditioned and I got it. It was a comedy, *Come Blow Your Horn*. On opening night, I heard the laughs and I was like, "Oh

yeah, this is fun. I like this!" That's really when I started to pivot toward acting.

**What do you consider your big break?**

In the dance world, it was when I got a job in the chorus of the national company of *My Fair Lady*. I was so over the moon. I went on the road with them to Boston and Philadelphia and all these different places. It was very exciting.

As an actress, the first soap opera that I got in New York was *The Secret Storm*. I played Rocket, a nightclub singer. I actually sang on camera. I hope that film doesn't exist anywhere. I was very bad as a singer.

**In 1971, you landed a role in *Play Misty for Me* with Clint Eastwood. What was he like to work with?**

I was totally intimidated because he was a huge movie star. When I went down to meet him, my heart was beating so fast! He was formidable, but the sweetest man in the world. It was really a joy to work with him.

**Of course, everyone remembers you as Abby on *Knots Landing*. What was that audition like?**

I went in and begged for that role. I thought they wouldn't hire me because I played goody-two-shoes roles, but I begged. An hour later, they called me and said, "You got it." I knew that it was going to be a great role.



## HEART to heart

### What did you like most about playing Abby?

Oh, everything. They wrote her so beautifully. She was naughty, but she had vulnerabilities. She was a good mother. She had a lot of different sides to her. So she was never a caricature. I loved playing her.

### Knots also had a great cast.

It was. It was an ensemble of actors, no stars. There were no prima donnas. But think about it — [we had] Julie Harris and Ava Gardner. That was wonderful. And also Joan Van Ark and Michele Lee. We're all still good friends, all these years later.

### Do you have any favorite memories you can share?

There's so many — I love Michele, but she can be kind of pushy. (She knows this, so I'm not saying anything out of school.) There was one thing on the set where she was kind of pushing me and I just turned around and said, "You don't do that to me!" And she was like, "Whoa!" We laugh about it now. We had that kind of relationship where we could just be ourselves. I think that's why it's lasted so long.

### What was it like to work with Ava Gardner?

I loved Ava, I really did. She was such a broad! She smoked and she drank and she used a lot of bad language! She was great

fun. We all loved her a lot. She got sick soon after she worked on *Knots*. She wouldn't let us come to the hospital to see her. She didn't want anybody to see her not looking great.

### In the 1990s, you stepped away from acting to become a mom to your daughter, Chloe. Was that a hard decision?

No, I knew it was what I wanted to do. By the time I did that, it was a little late for me to be able to have a baby. I thought, "Well, that's OK. I'll adopt a child." I really feel like that child was meant to be with me. Fate came in and put her in my arms at 4 days old. She was mine and I was hers. That was probably one of the happiest periods of my life. I've loved my career, God knows, but being a mom outshines everything.

### In 2014, you went back to your roots in daytime drama and spent some time on *General Hospital*. How did that occur?

After my daughter went off to college, I was kind of like, "Oh, OK. I need to be doing something." I thought about being an interior designer, because I love that, but I would have had to go back to school. Right about that time, *General Hospital* came calling. I give the actors on soaps all

### KISS AND TELL?

"Whenever anybody starts to talk to me about writing a book, they start to ask about my romances," says Donna. "That's what people seem to be most interested in, but I am not going to do one of those books."



### DONNA'S LIFE IN THE SPOTLIGHT



**LITTLE GIRL** Donna grew up in Norwood Park, one of Chicago's oldest communities.

**DRAMA DAYS** In 1966, Donna joined the cast of *The Secret Storm*. "When I did it, it was very exciting for my parents," she recalls.



**BAD ROMANCE** She played the former girlfriend of Clint Eastwood's DJ character in 1971's *Play Misty For Me*.



**“I always wore the highest heels possible, because the other women on the show were tall.”**

—Donna Mills

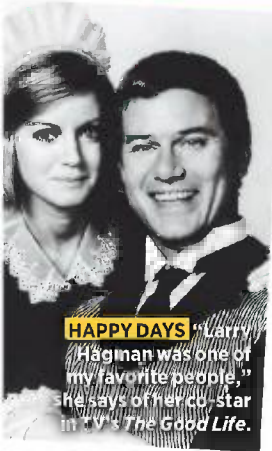
the credit in the world because it is one hard job these days. They shoot two or three shows a day. I found, for me, it wasn't terribly satisfying, because I never felt like I was doing my best work.

**What do you do for fun?**

I play tennis. I love tennis. If I'm not working, I will play probably about five times a week. I also work out almost every day.

**What's on your bucket list?**

That's a good question. I'd love to do a television series again. I like working, and I like knowing when and where I am going to be working! Actually, last night, I finished doing something — it's a movie, but it could become a series, so we'll see what happens. —Susan Hornik



**HAPPY DAYS** “Larry Hagman was one of my ‘favorite people.’” She says of her co-star in TV’s *The Good Life*.



**BACK ON THE BLOCK** She returned for the reunion miniseries *Knots Landing: Back to the Cul-de-Sac* in 1997.



**WIDE ACCLAIM** Donna won a Daytime Emmy for Outstanding Special Guest for her role on *General Hospital*.



**FAMILY SECRETS** *V.C. Andrews' Dawn* is available on Lifetime. The finale debuts on July 15.