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## Bryce Dallas Howard Recalls a Childhood Filled With Fantasy

The 'Rocketman' actress took long walks alone in the woods and spent time on the movie sets of her father, director Ron Howard



Bryce Dallas Howard in London. PHOTO: DYLAN THOMAS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Marc Myers - May 28, 2019

*Bryce Dallas Howard, 38, is an actress who has starred in 27 films, including “The Help” and “Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom.” She plays young Elton John’s mother in “Rocketman,” which opens May 31. She spoke with Marc Myers.*

When I was 4, my parents moved us from Los Angeles to Greenwich, Conn. My twin-sisters, Jocelyn and Paige, had just been born and my parents wanted us to have a normal, grounded childhood.

They discovered Greenwich while house-hunting north of New York in the mid-1980s. The surrounding area was charming and a step back in time. The landscape was wooded and rustic, with lakes and beautiful rolling hills.

Researching the area, my parents found that nearby schools were excellent, and there was plenty of outdoor space. Land was important, since we were big animal lovers. By big, I mean we had dogs, cats, a pig, sheep, miniature donkeys, horses, a turtle, two birds and 20 chickens named Jennifer. They all looked the same and responded to the name.

Living near Manhattan made perfect sense. My dad, director Ron Howard, and my mom, Cheryl, an actor and writer, could commute into the city and access major airports. And we'd still have a backyard to play in.

Growing up, I had an epic fantasy life. When my brother, Reed, was born in 1987, the house was noisy with three kids under age 3. I escaped into the woods adjacent to our property.

I loved reading fairy tales and would walk for long stretches by myself in the woods. It was a hidden kingdom—silent but alive.

Behind our house was a lake that I could see from my bedroom window. In the middle was a small island. Occasionally, I'd build up the courage to canoe out to it. The island was a constant source of intrigue.

My childhood was spent either in the woods or on a movie set with my dad. I had little jobs to keep me occupied. Being on set was my favorite place to be when I wasn't at home with the family.

My mom is truly one-of-a-kind. She's inspiring and fearless. She soloed an airplane when she was 16 years old—the same year that she and my dad started dating.

From an early age, I thought of her as intelligent, adventurous and a true matriarch. She kept the family unified despite the frequent travel and unpredictability of life in the movie industry.

Unfortunately for her, I was pretty stubborn as a teen. I wasn't rebellious for the sake of pushing back, but I was emotionally rebellious. I had plenty of teenage attitude. Despite dealing with my adolescent quirks, my mom never let me get out of doing chores. My tasks included mucking out the goat barn and making the family breakfast at 5 a.m.

Being a hard worker herself, my mom wasn't about to raise lazy kids. I remember those quiet early mornings on my own with fondness.

My friend Alice set an incredible example and helped set me on the right path. Between 7th and 9th grades, when Alice went to Vassar College in the summer for university-level academics, so did I. Alice also tried out for school plays. So did I. Initially, I was shy about performing. But, as always, Alice set a fearless example and encouraged me.

When Alice enrolled at Stagedoor Manor in Loch Sheldrake, N.Y., I followed. My first play there was “A Midsummer Night’s Dream.” I fell in love with rehearsals, being part of a company of actors and the thrill of live performance.

I made a true friend in actress Natalie Portman, who also was in the play. At one point, I said to Natalie that I hoped she would work with my dad one day. Natalie said, “Bryce, I hope I get to work with you!” A lightbulb went on in my head. I realized then that I wanted to act.

In 2014, my parents sold the Greenwich property. By then we were all out of the house, and they were downsizing. I had mixed feelings.

On the one hand, everything comes to an end. On the other, it’s where I spent so much time as a child, where I got married and where my kids fell in love with the woods just like I did.

Today, my husband, actor Seth Gabel, and I live with our two children, Theo and Beatrice, in the country in upstate New York.

We have a three-bedroom stone house on an acre of land. We’re here instead of in L.A. because we wanted our children to have the same experiences I did growing up.

I still walk the woods behind our house and feel the same sense of magic and mystery that I did as a child. There’s a depth of feeling and presence there, like a walking meditation without distraction. Best of all, I’m able to focus, settle my thoughts and dream.