

## THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

# Glamorous Kaptur captured modern desert life

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In the pantheon of interesting and industrious women who have called Palm Springs home, Helen Dzo Kaptur certainly ranks.

Kaptur and her equally fascinating friend, Nelda Linsk, were immortalized in 1970 by Slim Aaron's intoxicating image "Poolside Gossip," shot at the Richard Neutra-designed Kaufmann House. Attired in a white lace ensemble of crop top and palazzo pants, Kaptur looks every bit the modern goddess. But there was more to her than just divine good looks.

Born in Burbank, California, in 1929, Kaptur modeled bathing suits for Cole of California from the age of 15. Her parents had little means yet had saved \$500 to give their daughter etiquette lessons that lead to her participation in the Miss California beauty pageant. Her experience netted her small but fashionable roles in a few films.

She married builder William Dzo Dzo and moved to Palm Springs in 1956. They settled down to a simple life in a beautiful Spanish home at 256 Camino Buena Vista. Bill was busy with his D & D Construction Company. Later they lived at 442 Avenida Palmera. Life in Palm Springs was good. They were involved in the community and civic events.

Kaptur's appearances at social events were carefully covered by The Desert Sun: "The charity affair will feature champagne, hors d'oeuvres and informal modeling of gowns, furs and jewels to be worn by Helen Dzo Dzo, Barbara Marx, Nelda Linsk, Susie Johnson, Shirley Lewis and Barbara Salm. Strolling musicians will provide music for the event."

Kaptur's adventures sometimes made the stuff of feature articles. "Helen Dzo Dzo, one of our prominent models, also had a bout with the Beverly Hills police. Helen had to visit a dress shop on Wilshire Boulevard, and she parked her car in front of the shop. When she returned to the car, she found a ticket on the windshield, marked 'overtime parking.' The ticket was stamped 4:07 p.m. She looked at her wristwatch, which said only 3:55 p.m. 'I can make it, if I hurry,' she said aloud with foresight. And jumping in her car, she headed for the police station, which was nearby. Rushing into the station breathlessly, Helen asked the officer in charge what time it was by the clock on the wall. The officer eyed her curiously, looked at the clock and replied, 'It's one minute past four, lady. What can I do for you?' 'You can tear up this "overtime parking" ticket,' she answered, handing him the ticket. 'I'm sorry,' he apologized, 'there must have been some mistake.'"

The paper mused that there must be some moral to the story, perhaps: Read any ticket given you by law enforcement very carefully, and Helen Dzo Dzo had go-getter gumption to be emulated.

A darling of designers and photographers, Kaptur



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modeled for Bill Blass, Helga, Helen Rose, Dorothy Gray, Saks Fifth Avenue and I. Magnin. In 1967 and 1968, Emilio Pucci staged fashion shows in the garden of the Kaufmann house and Dzo Dzo dazzled all in attendance. She remembered those occasions: "They were the most fun shows, modeling around the pool with the house in the background, it was exciting."

"I met a lot of beautiful people in my life," she mused in an interview years later, adding that married life had been a fulfilling one. Bill's untimely death at age 41 left her a young widow in 1969. With resiliency and resolve, she carried on working as a couture model, and would expand into the business of fashion.

By 1970 she was traveling the country and the world. Her name was featured in newspaper fashion sections advertising her arrival in some far-flung town for special runway shows for a new Southern California fashion house, St. John's Knits.

The Post-Crescent newspaper noted her arrival in Birch Creek, Wisconsin, in 1973, with a striking photograph. She was queried about her style and exhausting schedule: "Certain things just have to be a certain way. That's the way Helen Dzo Dzo described

the Zodiac's influence and the peculiarities attached to being a Virgo who happens to stomp 40 thousand miles a year as public relations and advertising person for St. John Knits."

She described having to adhere to a rigid regime of being "constantly put together," never forgetting her toothbrush and always being classically attired. Her simple and direct presentations told the story of Robert and Marie St. John Gray, her friends and owners of the Irvine-based California company. Kaptur helped make the brand synonymous with knitwear that traveled well and always looked impeccably well, even just out of a suitcase.

The concept caused a fashion revolution. Handloomed, and pieced, crocheted or stitched, together, St. John knits were each unique. They carried a tag that documented the yarn, the dye lot, the exact factory, the workers who had sewn the piece. Each had a mini history attached to it before it was ever worn, a special provenance.

"Once you've had one," Kaptur described the St. John knit suit while making a play on words, "you're hooked."

Traveling at least half of every year, she described her perpetual packing, hanging and folding as a way of life, hectic but fun. She divided her time between Newport Beach and Palm Springs while working at St. John but settled back in Palm Springs in 2000 when she met architect Hugh Kaptur through mutual friends. They married.

In 2002, Robert Gray retired, and Helen Kaptur soon followed her boss and mentor. She was described by those around her as extremely modest, never haughty as might have expected considering her pulchritude. She was the best of friends with actress Mary Martin, who also retired to the desert. Kaptur tended her garden, cooked gourmet meals, and proudly watched the spotlight finally find her talented husband, Hugh.

Appreciation for the lifestyle captured in the Slim Aarons photograph would grow in the 21st century. Kaptur's image would become synonymous with that glamorous existence. In 2015, Modernism Week was preparing a redux of "Poolside Gossip" thanks to an idea by preservationist Gary Johns: Linsk and Kaptur would reminisce about that day in 1970 and their lives in Palm Springs during the midcentury for listeners.

In preparation, there was a new photograph taken of the two astonishing and attractive women in the same spot, around the Kaufmann pool, almost half a century later. Sadly, Kaptur wouldn't live to participate in the event, succumbing to ovarian cancer just before. Instead, Linsk would pay tribute to her friend in front of a rapt audience of admirers.

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