



# AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL

AMERICA FERRERA HAS MANAGED TO NAVIGATE HOLLYWOOD'S OFTEN TRICKY WATERS WHILE REMAINING TRUE TO HER PASSIONS. **BY DEBORAH CAULFIELD RYBAK**

**Y**ears before she burst into media bloom with her award-winning portrayal on *Ugly Betty*, America Ferrera knew she wanted to be a performer. She appeared in her first play (a school production of *Romeo and Juliet*) in third grade and the die was cast. The child of Honduran immigrants also found another passion at a young age: politics.

When she was in the fifth grade at Calabash Street Elementary School in the Los Angeles suburb of Woodland Hills, she came face to face with an uncomfortable set of realities. At the time, California had passed an amendment prohibiting benefits

for illegal immigrants (since voided). Ferrera clearly recalls the situation during a conversation from the set of her latest TV show, NBC's *Superstore*: "I remember my mom having to explain to me that if any teachers or anybody asked me questions at school that I was uncomfortable with about who I was and where I was from and who my family was, that I didn't have

LEFT TO RIGHT: America Ferrera as Amy in *Superstore*;  
Playing the lead role of Betty in *Ugly Betty*.



to explain myself or justify myself and that they didn't have a right to make me feel 'other' and uncomfortable," she says. "So even though I didn't fully understand the whole issue, I became aware."

Ferrera took those two passions and has crafted a career encompassing both. Capitalizing on the sudden celebrity earned by her portrayal of Betty Suarez, the unlikely fashion magazine employee, Ferrera—the first Latina to win a lead actress Emmy—has pursued projects and characters of substance. She appeared as the wife of farm worker activist Cesar Chavez in the film by the same name, as a tough cop in *End of Watch* and in *The Dry Land* as a woman struggling to understand her soldier husband's post-Iraq traumatic stress syndrome. That 2010 film was directed by Ryan Piers Williams, whom she married in 2011.

Ferrera says she has continued the pursuit of real-world rel-

**"WE'RE ABLE TO TELL STORIES [ON SUPERSTORE] ABOUT RACE AND GENDER AND SEXISM AND APPROACH THEM THROUGH THE LENS OF HUMOR, WHICH FOR ME WAS NORMAN LEAR'S GENIUS." —AMERICA FERRERA**

evancy in *Superstore*. "Our show is set in a big-box store with everyday, working-class Americans who come from different walks of life," she says. "It's a really incredible opportunity to tell stories about how our lives are impacted by all kinds of issues. The cast is also incredibly diverse, so that adds to our ability to approach things that you couldn't

do with a homogenous cast."

Ferrera says the show aspires to the Norman Lear-produced sitcoms of the 1970s, including *All in the Family*, *Sanford and Son* and *Maude*. "We're able to tell stories about race and gender and sexism and approach them through the lens of humor, which for me was Norman Lear's genius," she says, "to make people laugh and yet still be very relevant and reflective of the times. It's all very exciting to me."

In Hollywood, she says, most Latina women are often cast in highly sexualized roles. Ferrera has avoided that trap. "Each success I had opened more doors and more opportunities and gave me more freedom to decide what I wanted to be a part of," she explains. "There aren't that many roles that come along for women in general—much less women of color—so sometimes you can be left making the best with what is out there. So I've had a large amount of good luck and really good timing, and I also

**BELOW: Ferrera takes a selfie with James Corden on *The Late Late Show* in September.**



have been able to recognize when something felt really special and right for me to step into.”

That sense of timing also came into play with her latest off-screen

endeavor: She cofounded the non-profit organization Harness (harness. space), which uses special events and social media to connect artists with activists and bring their messages to

a wider audience.

The idea for the organization, which launched in February and claims to already have reached 175 million people via social media, arose from conversations Ferrera and her husband had with their friend actor Wilmer Valderrama.

“Our own lives were at the intersection of art and activism,” Ferrera says, so the three decided to build a community around that intersection. “We knew artists who wanted to use their art and their storytelling to create deeper, more authentic representations of certain communities and issues, and we knew of activists and organizers who were on the front lines. So we began to gather our friends on both sides.”

Since February, Harness has hosted a one-day seminar for more than 400 entertainment, tech, business and other advocates; has held

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**RIGHT: Ferrera holds up the Golden Globe she won for Ugly Betty in 2008.**

a roundtable discussion at the California Community Foundation and made a presentation to NBC show-runners and television executives about the importance of diversity on television, among other activities.

“I think the stories we tell about one another play a huge role in what we believe about our country and what we believe about ourselves,” she says. “If we can deepen those stories and make them more authentic and more reflective of the real world and of one another and our shared experiences, I think it can have a really positive impact on the larger social pack that we’re living in today.”

Harness has already amassed an array of supporters (including NBC and the Creative Artists Agency talent behemoth) and participating organizations (from Black Lives Matter to the ACLU), but the actress says

the organization is still in its infancy, and she admits to having no idea what the future holds. “Our growth as an organization has been dictated by really listening and trying to respond to what the actual needs are in the moment. We didn’t set out to build an organization. We literally set out to build a community. The organization part of it has been the biggest surprise of it.”

Not surprisingly, given her acting and activism commitments, when Ferrera is asked what she does to unwind, there’s a pause. “Well, there isn’t a lot of time for fun and relaxation,” she says. “My husband and I enjoy staying physically active. We have trained for three triathlons, and when we rest, we hang out with our dogs and friends.

“We try to do as little as possible when we’re not working.” ▼



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