

Famous New Yorker Mary Tyler Moore



Publicity photo from the Mary Tyler Moore Show (1972). Pictured from top to bottom and left to right are: Valerie Harper, Ed Asner, Cloris Leachman, Gavin MacLeod, Mary Tyler Moore and Ted Knight

Mary Tyler Moore probably would have been remembered for her supporting role on *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, but she made TV history playing an independent woman on a show with her own name on it.

Mary Tyler Moore was born in Brooklyn on December 29, 1936. When Mary was eight, her family moved to Los Angeles. After years of dance lessons, Mary hoped to find work as a dancer in Hollywood after graduating from high school. She landed her first professional dancing job in 1955, playing the Hotpoint kitchen appliance company's dancing elf mascot, Happy Hotpoint.

Before 1955 was over, Moore had married, become pregnant, and lost the Hotpoint job. After giving birth, she became one of many anonymous chorus dancers on TV's many musical variety shows. Her shapely legs attracted the attention of the producers of the *Richard Diamond, Private Detective* show. In 1959 they hired Moore to play Sam, a mysterious woman who communicated with Richard Diamond by phone. To keep Sam mysterious, episodes showed her legs but not her

face, and Moore received no credit for the role. Frustrated, she quit after thirteen weeks and identified herself as Sam to the media.

The publicity earned Moore guest roles on several TV shows. When she auditioned for a full-time role as the star's daughter on *The Danny Thomas Show*, Thomas recognized her talent but thought her nose too small to match his. He recommended Moore to Carl Reiner, who was planning a sitcom based on his experiences as a TV comedy writer. Impressed by her natural way with dialogue, Reiner cast her as Laura Petrie, the wife of the main character played by Dick Van Dyke.

The Dick Van Dyke Show ran from 1961 through 1966 and became one of TV's most beloved sitcoms. Mary Tyler Moore won two Emmy awards for her acting and seemed poised for greater stardom, but none of the movies she made in the late 1960s was popular at the box office.

Moore continued to appear on TV, where her performance on a Dick Van Dyke special convinced the CBS network to offer her a show of her own. She and Grant Tinker, her co-producer and second husband, wanted to do a sitcom about a divorced woman working in a TV news department. Network executives rejected the idea of a divorcee, but let Moore play an independent single woman.

Produced by her own company, MTM, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was a sensation from 1970 to 1977. Moore won four Emmys, shattered stereotypes of female comedians, and became a role model for growing numbers of single women pursuing careers. The opening-credits shot

of Mary tossing her hat in the air became an icon of women's progress, promising them that "You're going to make it after all."

Mary Tyler Moore never topped that success, but remained a star for the rest of her life. She won another Emmy, a Tony award for her stage work and an Academy Award nomination for her performance in the 1980 film *Ordinary People*. As her career slowed down, she earned new respect for candidly discussing her struggles with alcoholism and diabetes. When she died on January 25, 2017, she was mourned as an entertainment legend.

Full episodes of the Mary Tyler Moore Show are available to watch on cable, Hulu and Youtube. This is one of a series of Famous New Yorker profiles written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA News Media Literacy/NIE Program. All rights reserved 2018.

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Brooklyn is larger, both in terms of land area and population, than the borough of Manhattan and covers 71 square miles of land.