

# Dianne: The Unauthorized Biography of Dianne Cage



***The Ark-La-Miss kitchen and gardening diva opens up about love, life and family in this no holds barred profile. With charm and grace, Dianne Cage demonstrates why she is a Bayou Icon.***

*Article by Michael DeVault | Photography by Brad Arender*

A Faulkner novel would provide little fodder for the legend that is Dianne Cage, homemaker, wife, television personality, columnist. The stories about her exploits are known from Wisner to Winnfield, and there are few anywhere in northern Louisiana who haven't at least heard the name. Just ask, and you'll immediately hear myths before truth.

Larger than life, thanks in part to 30 years on KNOE-TV, she's used to gossip and tall tales. To her credit, Dianne shrugs when it comes to the numerous stories and when she's pressed to tell "the true story."

“How can you tell something that didn’t happen?” she told *BayouLife*. “Like Chuck Ryan says, ‘No one knows for sure but you.’”

But you already know the public stories—even if you don’t. The real story, the true story, is more moving, more emotional and more powerful than anything you think you know.

That’s not to say there aren’t nuggets of truth buried in the fictions that have been passed around over the years. Her children’s parties on holidays and birthdays are fit for fairy tails. Known for lavish dinner parties—almost always on behalf of this charity or that civic group—she’s the consummate hostess.

It couldn’t be that simple, though, not for Dianne Cage, a woman who once noted she’s been married four times, a curious fact given she’s only had two husbands. Whether she’s speaking of the tumultuous love she shared with George Snellings for 24 years or the peace, support and stability she finds in the love of her life and husband of 26 years, Dr. Mike Cage, it’s evident that Dianne is a woman who holds no resentments, no animosity. At the heart of virtually every story she shares, a common thread emerges. Dianne loves family. All in, she has two children, five step children, seventeen grandchildren and a smattering of nieces and nephews. And she adores wholly Mike Cage.

“You wouldn’t be writing this story if it weren’t for Mike Cage,” she said, almost always referring to him with both Christian and surname. They married in 1989, when Dianne was at the height of her television career. By then, through *Seasons of Louisiana with Dianne Snellings* on KNOE, her beaming smile and soft-spoken southern drawl were a staple of living rooms and kitchens throughout the Ark-La-Miss. *Seasons of Louisiana* was at the vanguard of home programming.

Before the world had Martha Stewart, Monroe had Dianne.

Through curious circumstances, she had come into the lives of her viewers. She was in the midst of major life changes. She was 45 years old, and she had endured a public divorce. Her children were both at LSU, and she had savings to carry them through college, but she knew something else would have to support her. She was living in her grandmother's house when, one day at lunch, that something else turned up.

"Jim Noe Jr. suggested we try to bring back Mildred Swift," she said. "But I told him I couldn't. I had horrid stage fright."

Still, they filmed a test screening. Immediately after wrapping an instructional on how to make French dressing, James Noe Sr. and Hugh Roach, KNOE's owner and general manager, approached. "Hugh said to me, 'Welcome to being a star,'" she recalled.

For three mornings a week, Dianne instructed her audience on the art of cooking southern cuisine, and she eventually branched out into hunting and gardening. She even occasionally had fun. "One day, I decided we weren't going to cook, and we weren't going to garden. So we went down to the river with the cameras and just threw sticks into water. We watched ducks fly by, listened to the breeze, and paid attention to the flowers and the bees."

Even in speaking of a day on the Ouachita, Dianne's graceful southern charm, playful wit and elegant demeanor seem to be masking something deeper. Underneath it all, there's a strength that's manifested time and again in her life, a fearlessness born of necessity. "I'm not afraid of anything," she said, laughing confidently.

This fortitude first appeared at an early age, one particular summer. The King family was on the river. Daddy, Mamma, Dianne and her two younger

sisters, Rebo and Wendy. Dianne was twelve at the time, and she recalls days on the river with a certain sense of nostalgia. This particular day, however, was different.

"We were out in the late afternoon. We were going to go to Long John Beach, but turned instead for Delta Beach," she recalled. That decision is where the trouble began. Long John Beach is a long, sandy swath of low-lying earth on the western bank of the river in a gentle curve. It's a popular spot for boaters to pull up and make camp. Delta Beach, on the other hand, is a high bluff, and it requires a bit of a climb to get to the top.

For Wendy, all of four, the difference between the two beaches was lost. Groggy from a nap, and with previous experience under her belt, she stepped off the boat, expecting to land on the soft sand of Long John Beach. Instead, she was met with the splash of a cold, swift river. Before her parents had time to react, Dianne was overboard after her.

"She went straight down," Dianne said. "Without thinking, I jumped right in after her. I was twelve."

Dianne remembers the day in vivid detail, noting how the current tried to pull her away, how holding her breath hurt, and how she first saw her sister underwater. "She was floating down there like a little angel."

She pulled her sister from the river and back to the safety of the boat, and Wendy was saved. For the first time, but not the last, Dianne proved she was her sisters' keeper. Just ten years later, tragedy would strike the King family. Only this time, instead of diving in to save the day, Dianne had to pick up the pieces.

Not long after I-20 opened, her mother, Ella Mae King, was in between Ruston and Monroe when the unthinkable happened. A horrific accident on

the new highway left her mother with a traumatic brain injury. In a coma and unresponsive, the outlook was grim. "They said she wasn't going to live," Dianne said. Yet, to the doctors' surprise, Ella Mae survived the immediate aftermath of the wreck.

For the next nine months, Ella Mae remained in St. Francis Hospital. She was eventually transferred to long-term care facilities, though for three years, she remained mostly in a coma. When she came out, Dianne's mother was no longer herself. Instead, she had reverted to an almost childlike state.

At just 22, Dianne suddenly found herself mothering her two younger sisters, who were just 12 and 14 at the time. She had been married to George Snellings III only a short time, and she credits him and his family with the support she needed. "I couldn't have done it without the Snellings," she said, adding that her in-laws were by her side the whole time. "George and Mary Louise told me we could send her anywhere in the world or bring in any doctor in the world."

It was the support she needed, and it bolstered her love of her husband, George Snellings III, and his family. Though the circumstances weren't easy, Dianne took it in stride. "It was a struggle, but every day she was here she was a blessing," Dianne said. Ella Mae remained a blessing for more than 46 years.

Along the way, Dianne learned some valuable lessons. First, she learned family is paramount. Without her father, aunts, uncles and in-laws, the trauma of suddenly finding herself mothering two teenaged girls might have been too much. Yet, she had that support, and she persevered. Where others may have become sullen or depressed, Dianne found joy. That's the second lesson.

“Never lose your sense of humor,” she said. “Don’t take yourself too seriously, and never believe everything people tell you about yourself.”

Part of that sense of humor manifested itself more than thirty years later, when Dianne found herself wearing a white wedding dress and cowboy boots on a diving board. But we’ll get to that soon enough. Before she could wear the dress on a diving board, she had to get the dress.

Dianne recalled one weekday in the Spring of 1955, when she was a student at Georgia Tucker. She was about to graduate the 6th Grade, which meant she would transfer to Neville High School in the Fall. Students graduating were taken by bus to Neville for orientation. Sitting in the balcony of the auditorium, Dianne recalls a moment...the moment. The student body president took the podium to address the incoming class.

He was a tall, handsome man with an athleticism befitting his position on the Neville varsity football squad. While some of her classmates were bored, Dianne was enthralled by the young man and immediately developed a schoolgirl crush. “It was like falling in love with Roy Rogers,” she said. That young man’s name was Mike Cage.

She laughs today. “The Lord works in mysterious ways,” she said. Though she had seen the man of her dreams, those dreams would have to wait a while. It was a feeling she would have again, thirty years later, when Mike Cage asked her to dance at Cotillion. A few years later and newly single, Dianne and Mike began dating. Eventually, he asked her to marry him.

“Mike Cage saved me,” she said. “Everything I am, I am because of him. He’s the one that’s made it possible for me to do all these things.”

Together, Mike and Dianne have traveled the world. They’ve seen Europe, virtually all of North America, and Mexico. Meanwhile, their love continues

to grow. Spend a few minutes in the hive of activity that is their home in the historic Garden District and it's clear that they worship each other.

And about that home. Dianne said the constant in-and-out of visitors, ringing phones, and whirlwind activities with the grandkids is the reason Mike's still working. "He says he can't wait until Monday rolls around because he wants to get back to work so he can rest," Dianne said. Theirs is a happy home, and that's something Dianne works to make. There's a reason it's called homemaking, after all. And when it comes to making a home, Dianne has had double practice with the Glenmar house.

Situated on a large double lot in the heart of Monroe's historic Garden District, the house was originally designed and built for the Mickel family on a lot Dianne's grandmother sold to the Mickels. Shortly after Dianne married Mike in 1989, the house went on the market. At the time, Dianne and Mike were living on K Street, in the home that had once belonged to Dianne's grandmother.

"Mike says I haven't gone very far in life," she said of her love for the Garden District. Close to home or not, the Cages purchased the Mickel house in 1992 and immediately undertook extensive renovations and modernization. To cap off the experience, Mike decided to reward his wife's efforts with a trip to visit friends in London. They were set to leave shortly after work was completed.

With furniture in place, art on the walls and workers finishing a few punch list items, the unthinkable happened. A fire sparked in the attic, and in short order, the home was engulfed in flames. Firemen, neighbors, even Dianne herself sprung into action. "There I was, asking, 'Would you please get my chandelier down?'"

As the fire slowly spread, working in teams, they saved most of the items in

the home. At the end of the day, the home was gutted. "There was nothing left but the brick walls," Dianne said. In characteristic fashion, Dianne took it in stride. Workers started demolition and she and Mike did the only thing they could do. They hopped a jet to London to visit the Cudd family. "When we got back from London, they already had the roof on."

When she speaks of London, of her trips there with Mike Cage, she lights up. In some small way, London is almost like a second home, and to hear her tell it, London likes Dianne almost as much as she likes London. One evening, Mike booked tickets to see Smokey Joe's Café on the West End. The seats were great, she recalls, and near the stage in the fourth row orchestra. While they were settling into their seats, Dianne noticed someone out of the corner of her eye. She nudged her husband, and he confirmed what she had suspected.

"It was Princess Margaret and her beautiful, handsome entourage. Beautiful women in jewels with hair perfectly coiffed, men in bespoke suits," Dianne said. Not wanting anyone else around her to miss out on a special moment, Dianne turned discretely around and spoke to the couple sitting behind her, a group of Americans she had heard speaking. "I told them to not look all at once, but asked if they realized who they were seated near."

The man smiled, and then he asked Dianne if she realized who she was seated near. He introduced himself as Eugene Habiger, commander of the United States Strategic Command, the four-star general in charge of all missiles in the U.S. arsenal. Unfazed, Dianne playfully prodded back.

"Well, do you realize who's sitting in front of you?" I said. "I'm Dianne Cage from Monroe, Louisiana, home of Coca-Cola and Delta Airlines, and I wrote a cookbook," she said. "He got very quiet, then turned to his wife and said, 'Barb, why haven't you written a cookbook?'" And just like that, Dianne had



made new friends for life. The couples exchanged letters and gifts for a time. Such is how it goes in the world of Dianne.

Almost counter-intuitively, nearly losing a sister, the trauma suffered by her mother and a house nearly totaled by fire, all led Dianne to a font of happiness. Not only did she understand the value of good friends, neighbors and help when you need it, but she learned another valuable lesson: things are replaceable. People, not so much. It's no surprise, then, that when it comes to possessions, Dianne bears precious few attachments. Her advice to someone who owns Grandmother's china or Father's favorite watch. Use them. Or in the case of a wedding dress, repurpose it.

Dianne was hosting a wedding for a friend from San Antonio, and Dianne decided she would wear her wedding dress in honor. It was a weekend of activities. During a lull in the party, Dianne decided to liven things up. She donned a pair of cowboy boots, climbed onto the diving board and called for everyone's attention. "It was kind of quiet, and I decided to wake them up a bit," she said. Without another word, she dove into the pool. "It just seemed like a good idea at the time."

Mike Cage was impressed. "He said, 'I love a woman whose wedding dress doubles as a bathing suit,'" she said. "Everybody thought I would drown with my cowboy boots, but I'm a very strong swimmer."

The wedding dress story goes to show how humor and making memories is inherent in the lack of sentimentality for possessions. "Things are replaceable, and they don't make happiness," Dianne said. Sitting by a picture window framing the fountain on her patio, Dianne watches a yellow finch frolic and considers what her life might look like if she hadn't used an item and then lost it. What memories would she have? Her home certainly wouldn't be the same.

"Houses are to be used," she said, and she constantly uses hers. It's the seat of the family's numerous gatherings, dinner parties for charities, and the place friends drop by for a cup of coffee. If Dianne isn't in the yard, she's in her kitchen, cooking. Use is what makes a happy home, and the Glenmar house gets used. "Greg Jordan said it has the right smell, like Rigaud Candle and fried chicken."

Most days, too, there are children running around. Between them, Mike and Dianne have a lot of grandchildren. She has some advice for parents and grandparents, too. Let the kids be kids. They enjoy playing, and those are memories they're making.

At 72, Dianne is enjoying taking time for herself. All told, she's traveled to six continents, including more than 35 trips to London and Europe, hunted wild game in Africa and big cats in the American southwest. The author of two best-selling cookbooks and a thirty-year run as a host on KNOE haven't jaded Dianne, who sits on the board or volunteers for numerous charities and foundations. She gives credit to Mike and to God for bringing her this far and allowing her to be herself.

"You have to be happy, and you have to have faith," she said. "Anything that happens, there's always something that could be worse."