

C THE NEXT H A P P Y T E R

SHE'S BEEN A RICE FARMER, JOURNALIST, WINE-
GRAPE BUSINESS OWNER, AUTHOR, EGG CARVER,
PUBLIC SPEAKER, BLOGGER, WIFE, MOTHER
AND GRANDMOTHER, BUT MITZI PERDUE
ISN'T FINISHED REINVENTING HERSELF

Interview by Robbie Tarpley Raffish Portrait by Grant L. Gursley

Whatever preconceived notions one might have about Mitzi Perdue, they probably don't include a platter of candy and a handwritten "Please Take One" sign by her front door. Yet, it turns out that the woman who was born the daughter of the cofounder of Sheraton and who became the wife of chicken magnate Frank Perdue is both warm and unpretentious. Maybe it's because she's lived longer on Delmarva than anywhere else.

That said, no one would call her "homespun"; she's clearly a force to be reckoned with. Rice farmer, journalist, wine-grape business owner, author, egg carver, public speaker, blogger, mother and grandmother, she wears and has worn many hats. While her birth certificate says she's past 70, her RealLife.com quotient is 48 (which she says "physically feels right.") And emotionally? "I've learned from my grandchildren that I'm really only 7, maybe 8 years old!" when it comes to her curiosity and zest for life.

Salisbury writer, business owner and *Coastal Style's* new features editor Robbie Tarpley Raffish spent a recent morning speaking with Perdue about her life today as a writer and motivational speaker, what she still has left to do on her bucket list, and why, when she could have lived anywhere, she returned to make her home on Delmarva. ➔



RTR: You left Delmarva for some time after you lost your husband, Frank. What was that like? And what brought you back?

MP: When Frank died [in 2005], I was just really, really down. After a while, a cousin of mine reminded me that I was really not good to anyone if I just stayed home and cried. She gently suggested that maybe I needed to make a change. So, I packed everything up and went to New York City — and it worked. It eventually broke the spell. Once that happened, I was able to come back [in 2010], and I am so glad I did.

You recently wrote a book titled *Tough Man, Tender Chicken: Business & Life Lessons from Frank Perdue*. What was the catalyst for it?

I started out to write a book for business students. Education was very important to Frank, and he used to say some pretty insightful things that I thought were worth sharing. As writing the book progressed, I realized that while business students would be interested, the scope of what I learned from him — and from the 134 people I interviewed about him — reached much farther.



LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT: Frank and Mitzi were married a little more than six weeks after meeting. They were married for 17 years and inseparable, according to Mitzi, until Frank passed away in 2005.

For instance, he taught me that when making a career choice, you should list 10 things you really enjoy in life, and then make sure the thing you did for a living overlapped at least some of them, the more the better. He used to say: “Your twenties are for learning, and your thirties are for earning” when he encouraged people to experiment in finding not just a vocation but an avocation. And maybe most important of all, he created an “Ethical Will” that helps guide our family to this day (See sidebar, right). I wanted to take that document and further embed it into the culture of our family and share it with others.

Were you always a writer?

My career found me. I began as a rice farmer in Northern California. That may sound strange if you know my background, but I have always loved agriculture. I had taken a series of agriculture courses at University of California at Davis, and then I received a small inheritance, which I used to buy a rice farm. Rice is staple crop of the world, and even the tiniest differences in how it is raised can have a big impact on the crop. It fascinated me.

During that time, a bill was moving through the California assembly that would have outlawed the burning of rice field “stubble” — what is left after the rice is cultivated — and none of us farmers were ready to manage the issue. We needed to get our house in order. I’d never written before, but I wanted to bring attention to the issue. So, I went to the library and checked out a book called *How to Write Magazine Articles That Sell* and started writing.

My article was accepted for publication — as the cover story, no less — in an inflight magazine distributed on the airline that most legislators flew as they moved around the state. Then, it was picked up in syndication by a couple of hundred media outlets in the West. When the dean of the California senate said he’d been persuaded [to give the farmers time to find an alternative], I was hooked.

It’s amazing how one experience can change the course of one’s career. What came next?

Well, then, I got the biggest surprise of my life. A local TV station asked me to talk about the topic. That red light came on, and I felt so alive! Many people freeze, but I felt so eager to communicate. After that appearance, I was asked by the station manager to host a half-hour show about farming, and, crazy as it may sound, we did 400 episodes.

A LESSON IN ETHICS

Frank Perdue left an Ethical Will as a legacy for his family. His wife, Mitzi, feels it is so important to share that it is on the back cover of her recent book, “Tough Man, Tender Chicken: Business & Life Lessons from Frank Perdue,” for all to see. It is reproduced here with her permission.

Dear Children, Grandchildren and Family Members (present or future):

I want little more than your long-term happiness. To be happy, you need character and self-respect, and these things come from following your highest values. To be happy, consider the following:

1. Be honest always.
2. Be a person whom others are justified in trusting.
3. If you say you will do something, do it.
4. You don’t have to be the best, but you should be the best you can be.
5. Treat all people with courtesy and respect, no exceptions.
6. Remember that the way to be happy is to think of what you can do for others. The way to be miserable is to think about what people should be doing for you.
7. Be part of something bigger than your own self. That “something” can be family, pursuit of knowledge, the environment or whatever you choose.
8. Remember that hard work is satisfying and fulfilling.
9. Nurture the ability to laugh and have fun.
10. Have respect for those who have gone before; learn from their weaknesses and build on their strengths.

— Frank Perdue

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Did you know you would like the camera?

The question was asked as photographer Grant L. Gursky was taking pictures of Perdue for this article, and Perdue was suggesting locations and poses.

Well, as a child one sure way to get my father's attention was to be his model. He loved his cameras, and I loved to pose! Later, I was a debutant, and there was even more of it. So, I think it just became part of who I am.

So, circling back, you found you were a journalist at heart?

For about 22 years I wrote and wrote and wrote: first for the local paper, then for The Capital News Service and eventually for Scripps Howard.

You have two sons and four grandchildren. One can only assume they are your pride and joy.

You know the thing I think I am most proud of in my life? That Frank's and my families blended so well. One of my sons, Carlos, is at Perdue, in management, and the other, Jose, is a Ph.D. geneticist working in Texas.

And yes, one of the supreme pleasures in life is playing with grandchildren. When they told me that they were interested in science, I bought them small lab coats and goggles, and we started doing experiments. Their favorite is working with acids and bases in my kitchen to make "plosions" — they love when the mixture bubbles over the sides of the glass beakers!

I once heard you say that you met Frank at a business function and locked eyes across a room. What happened?

There was an immediate connection. We actually talked about marriage that night — how it could be supportive but not competitive, how we both wanted someone who could rejoice in each other's successes and provide support when things were hard. We were married six weeks and three days later! And we stayed married for 17 years. It was just meant to be.

While your main living space is traditional and cozy, your office and studio space are very contemporary. How do you feel about technology?

I love it. I do my own posting on Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, and update my website. [Fittingly, Siri breaks in at this moment, to remind Perdue of an appointment.] But now, as I am transitioning into more and more public speaking, it's time to update my website, and I've hired a very experienced company to do that. It has to be really professional and top-notch.

You are speaking on average once a week and commanding a significant speaker's fee. Are you nervous when you speak publicly?

Never. I love it. It goes back to that TV show: Give me an audience, and I feel

I was very surprised and excited. My community is so important to me. I have lived on Delmarva longer than anywhere else, and I am thrilled to be part of it at this particular time. Especially as the city of Salisbury is working on a new brand. There is so much energy here. It is the right mix of making things happen and relaxing and enjoying life.

You are known for your elaborately carved eggs. How did that hobby come about?

Again, another surprise. I never thought I had much artistic ability. Many years ago, I was in a car accident and was housebound for nine months. Initially, I was excited at the idea that I would be able to read all day and finally see what was on daytime TV — and after two weeks, I was bored to death. I had to find something to do. I did some research and started carving eggs. It took me a while to work out that ostrich eggs were the best to work with, and over the years I've been able to progress into cutting and hinging them into clocks and purses and other things. I'm working on one now that looks like the original Millennium Falcon for my son; he's a major *Star Wars* fan.

It is impressive that you are still working to learn new things at an age when many people want to sit back and rest. What is next for you?

I really want to get into blogging for myself. I do blog already for the Academy of

Women's Health, and I write articles for *GEN: Genetic Engineering & Biotechnology News*. And about half of what I write is about philanthropy. Right now I am doing profiles of all 22 United Way recipient organizations for a local newspaper. That said, I'd like to turn my business topics into an active blog. I have about 50 posts written, but I need to do some more before I can take that step.

So, what is left on your bucket list?

One of my mottos is that "Success is measured not by what you can get as what you can give." So, really, I am very lucky. I am living my bucket list. 🙏



AN OVAL GIFT FOR THE OVAL OFFICE: Mitzi, accompanied by Frank, presented President Bill Clinton and First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton with one of her famous egg creations, titled "The Shepherd's World."

alive. But now it's more special because I am speaking to family-owned businesses, business students and graduate programs about the lessons I learned from Frank.

That said, I really wanted to be prepared. I've spent the last year training with the National Speakers Association Academy. They offer a course that includes eight hours of classroom time and another 40 hours a month of homework. I want each business and school to know they hired a professional.

You received the "Best Philanthropist of Wicomico County" award from the readers of this magazine. How did that feel?