



Regular exercise is an important part of Annette's therapy. Now 49, she divides her time between an Encino, California, home and a sprawling ranch near Bakersfield.

ANNETTE FIGHTS BACK

Annette Funicello wants no pity as she assumes an active role in the fight against the disease that counts her among its victims—multiple sclerosis.

by Holly G. Miller

When Annette Funicello was nudged by an "enquiring" media to confirm the unhappy news that she has multiple sclerosis, she worried about the effect on her fans. In the spotlight for more than 35 years—first as a TV Mouseketeer, then as leading teen in a spate of beach-party films, and finally as spokesmother for Skippy peanut butter—she had always led a charmed life. Nothing *bad* ever happened to Annette. Her fiercely loyal fans kept her in a time warp, forever wedged between Doreen and Cubby, or kicking sand with Frankie Avalon. Like the wholesome characters she played on the big screen, she seemed destined for a happily-ever-

after kind of life.

"That's why I debated about going public," admits Annette. "I've always had a sort of fantasy existence in show business and have never had to face a lot of disappointments and hard knocks. Because people think my life is so perfect, I didn't want to upset them or burst their bubble. I even wondered if people would still like me. And I worried that they might not know how to take MS because not many people understand very much about it. I certainly didn't."

The diagnosis had been made in 1987, shortly after she had wrapped up *Back to the Beach*, a tongue-in-cheek reunion movie with her old pal,

Frankie Avalon. Her persistent vision problems and complaints of wobbly legs initially had been the source of over-the-hill jokes between the 40-something friends. But when the symptoms persisted, she agreed to see a neurologist. An MRI test (magnetic resonance imaging) confirmed the diagnosis: multiple sclerosis. She told only her husband Glen Holt, her mother, and her three children, Gina, 27, Jackie, 22, and Jason, 18.

The secret was theirs for five years; but rumors finally surfaced several months ago when she appeared in public, unsteady on her feet. She blamed tendinitis—after all, she had been a dancer since childhood. When her loss of balance caused her to lean more noticeably on a cane and on Glen's arm, reporters from a supermarket tabloid began knocking on her neighbors' doors. "Is it true about Annette?" they asked, probing for clues. Finally, a writer called Annette at home and requested an "exclusive." She knew she had to go public with the story rather than risk release of a

trumped-up version. Still, she fretted about the response to her news.

"It was phenomenal," she says, looking back. "I never dreamed it would be anything like this. The well-wishers seemed to speak straight from the heart."

Cards and letters jammed her mailbox at home and poured into the Disney studios. Calls and notes flooded her agent's office and the headquarters of the magazine that published the story. Officials at the National Multiple Sclerosis Society acknowledged that they, too, had always been fans of Annette, and quickly recruited her as the Society's national ambassador. When word got out, donations rolled in.

"I heard from people who had grown up with me over the years," she says, "but I also heard from new friends with MS who wanted to compare notes and give me helpful hints. I got a lot of home remedies, bottles of medicine, and videos on the subject. The notes would say, 'This helped me; try it!'"

The outpouring of affection

shouldn't have surprised her. Among a handful of stars who have survived show business on one name—Cher, Madonna, Prince—only Annette has done it without raising eyebrows. Always a straight arrow but never a goody-two-shoes, she was everybody's fantasy date, every girl's best friend, and every parent's ideal daughter. Her ability to connect with audiences was recognized when she was 12 and dancing the lead in a ballet at the Starlight Bowl in Burbank. Walt Disney was in the audience that night and quietly arranged for her to audition for a new show, "The Mickey Mouse Club." Not only did Annette join the club, but she emerged as its favorite member.

She describes her four years as a Mouseketeer as "never drudgery" in spite of the demanding seven-day work week. Disney and his staff tried to preserve an environment of normalcy for their mouse-eared troupe of singers and dancers. The only clue Annette had of her growing popularity was an off-hand comment by Mr. Disney: "You must have a lot of relatives writing to you because your fan mail is astronomical." The staff didn't count the letters or log the gifts because the Mouseketeers were promoted as a group



The lone Mouseketeer to emerge with a long-term film contract, Annette starred in several beach-party comedies. She always abided by Walt Disney's request: No bikini, please.



Aired daily from 1955-59, The Mickey Mouse Club typically included a newsreel, a production number, part of a serial, and a cartoon. A revival of the show delighted a second generation. Among its fans: Annette and her children Gina, Jack, and baby Jason.





Men won't hug a porcelain figurine but they never balk at a bear. Her collectible furry friends now number 32, each named by company executive Annette. Favorites have emerged and some sold out shortly after introduction.



Annette's Italian heritage gave her dark eyes and curly dark hair that drew attention in a group of blond, freckle-faced Mouseketeers. "But they were better singers and dancers," she admits.

and not as a collection of stars-on-the-rise.

"By the second year, when we were going on the road more and more, we knew the fans had favorites and were screaming to see and stand next to certain Mouseketeers. Mr. Disney finally told me about the cards and gifts. He said, 'I think you're going to have to help the fan-mail department answer some of this correspondence.'"

Two Annette fan clubs were launched in 1955 and are still active today. (Indicative of her loyalty, Annette insists that the president of her East Coast club stay with her when visiting the West Coast.) Even after the Mouseketeers disbanded, Annette remained under contract to Disney and appeared in a number of TV shows including "Zorro" and starred in such films as "The Shaggy Dog," "Babes in Toyland," "The Misadventures of Merlin Jones," and "The Monkey's Uncle." A recording career spun off from her movies, and her "Tall Paul" and "Pineapple Princess" quickly topped the charts.

She picked her projects carefully,

always mindful of her family's, fans', and studio's expectations of her. She didn't consciously cultivate a squeaky-clean effect; it just came naturally. The on-screen Annette closely matched the off-screen version.

"Being polite, being on time, acting in a professional manner when I was working—those things were instilled by my parents when I was very young," she says. "I give my mother and father all the credit because they always stressed that I am no better than anyone else. At work, of course, I wanted Mr. Disney to be proud of me. He was a wonderful boss, and I valued everything he ever told me."

When she briefly toyed with the idea of changing her last name—Funicello seemed to be a mouthful back then—Disney counseled against it. Her name had a beautiful Italian lilt to it, he said. Keep it. And she did. Another famous piece of Disney advice was tendered when Annette was loaned out to star in the popular beach-party films. "That's when the famous story of never showing my navel arose," she says. "Mr. Disney

came to me one day and said, 'Annette, I have a favor to ask of you. I know all the girls in the film will be wearing bikinis, but you have an image to uphold and I would appreciate it if you would wear a one-piece suit.'

From time to time she was offered scripts that cast her as the "other woman," the drug user, the prostitute. No, thanks, was her stock answer. Instead, she accepted bread-and-butter jobs such as Skippy commercials and the *Back to the Beach* assignment. She occasionally did concerts with Avalon, and it was during a year-long "Annette & Frankie" tour that she finally shared the news of her multiple sclerosis diagnosis with her old pal. Her balance was getting worse and she wanted him to understand why she occasionally reached out to him onstage or gripped his hand when they took their bows. He took the news well. Much later she learned that Frankie had already been tipped off about her illness but had decided to wait until she was ready to confide in him.

"Before Frankie and I started the tour, my husband Glen called him, invited him to breakfast, and told him about the MS," she says. "Glen was worried about me going on the road, working on stage, and getting overly tired. I didn't realize this, and I waited until the end of the tour to tell Frankie. He never let on that he already knew. He didn't confess until we were guests on the Vicki Lawrence talk show. I said, 'But Frankie, your mouth seemed to hang open when I told you about the MS!' He said, 'That's the good actor in me.'"

Although MS has curbed her travel and concert schedule, Annette is far from being sidelined. She admits she "has good days and bad days," but she shrugs off pity, condolences, and nostalgic mouseke-tears. She'd rather talk teddy bears—a pet project that she currently oversees from home. Bears, she says knowledgeably, are big business these days. And she ought to know.

"I've been a collectible kind of person all my life," she explains. "And I love teddy bears. Did you know there actually are awards for teddy-bear designs? And that some of the very, very old bears go for \$80,000? I've also learned that a lot of adults, including men, love teddy bears. There's no embarrassment about holding or hugging a bear."

Her expanding menagerie of 32 designer bears is marketed by the Annette Funicello Bear Company and is available through the QVC shopping channel, and at Disneyland and DisneyWorld. Like many other collectibles, the stuffed toys are numbered, vary in size and price, and boast individual names. A particular favorite is dubbed "Shorty" in honor of her dad.

A more recent enterprise is her signature scent, a perfume slated for unveiling this month. Like her attraction to stuffed animals, her love for cologne dates back to her youth. She says she never left home without splashing on a favorite fragrance, and friends often teased her that they knew when she entered a room because the familiar scent underscored her arrival. One whiff said it all: Annette's here.

Word of her penchant for perfume eventually got around, and a perfume manufacturer contacted her with the idea of a new fragrance that would carry her name.

"We're calling it 'Cello,'" explains the woman who once thought of trading Funicello for a simpler Smith or Brown. She laughs at the memory: "Thank you, Mr. Disney... again!"

The scent took more than a year to develop. The chemist, who lives in Arizona, made frequent trips back and forth to California to uncork a variety of concoctions under Annette's discriminating nose. She discarded some, saying, "no, this is too strong;" or vetoing others with a "this is too flowery" or a "this is too heavy." Finally the right blend emerged. Annette struggles to describe it in a word, then settles on "spicy" but not *too* spicy.

If the description fits the product, it also fits the spokeswoman: mischievous but nice; spicy but sweet. At her insistence, a percentage of the perfume's profits will be donated to the National Multiple Sclerosis Society. In addition, she will speak out about the illness to increase awareness and generate support for research efforts. For now, that's enough. Yes, for now she'll leave the beach-blanket scene to the cast of the phenomenally popular TV show "90210."

She laughs at the irony and adds, "I guess everything comes around again."

Friends can write to Annette in care of Walt Disney Studios, 500 S. Buena Vista St., Burbank, California 91521. 🐻

What is MS?

"Many people still believe that MS is a fatal disease and that everyone diagnosed with it eventually ends up in a wheelchair," says Arney Rosenblat of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society in New York. *Not true*, corrects Rosenblat. Although the exact cause of the disease is unknown and no cure has yet been discovered, information and research about the illness is mounting. For example, doctors know that MS:

- ▶ is a chronic, often disabling disease of the central nervous system
- ▶ affects about 350,000 Americans
- ▶ typically strikes young people in their twenties and thirties
- ▶ attacks more women than men
- ▶ is neither fatal nor contagious nor inherited
- ▶ can result in a loss of balance, slurred speech, blurred vision, and paralysis

Symptoms vary greatly and often flare up during active periods of the disease and then disappear during periods of remission. Happily, two out of three patients remain ambulatory over their lifetimes. A variety of treatments—including physical therapy, exercise, and medication—can ease the symptoms. However, Rosenblat cautions that "the MS experience is different for each individual" and the unpredictable nature of the disease leaves its victims vulnerable to false claims and unproven treatments. In short, comparing notes on the disease may be comforting for patients, but they should remember that what works for one person may not work for another.

An active network of more than 1,400 support groups exists across the country to improve the quality of life for MS patients and their families, and 144 chapters and branches of the National MS Society offer a range of programs, services, literature, and videos.

To learn more about MS, contact the National Multiple Sclerosis Society at 733 Third Ave., New York, NY 10017. A toll-free telephone line is staffed 24 hours a day. Call 1-800-LEARN MS.