

# NORTH CAROLINIANS *of* NOTE

## Sharon Lawrence

### *A journey to success*

By Kate Farmer

She may be an award-winning actress, starring in national television shows, such as “NYPD Blue” and “One Tree Hill,” but her roots are local.

Born in Charlotte and raised in Raleigh, Sharon Lawrence, 50, took a liking to the arts as a child. She sang in school musicals and the church choir as an adolescent. Those around Lawrence constantly encouraged her natural talents. Early on, Sharon’s mother, says Lawrence’s father’s and aunt’s “serious acting” in stage performances furthered her daughter’s interest in the performing arts.

In her recognizable television voice, Lawrence spoke of her family’s influence in a recent phone interview, “I grew up with a family that valued that kind of commitment to the arts. We were that particularly gregarious family that always enjoyed telling stories.”

Her intense interest in the arts and her hard work in high school, college, New York and Los Angeles led to her success as an actress and musician. Lawrence excelled at Raleigh’s Needham Broughton High School where she played Lola in the musical “Damn Yankees.”

#### **Developing her talent in high school and college**

Terri Dollar, her drama teacher at Broughton, remembers the first time she saw Lawrence, “She had just moved to our school. She was singing a song from ‘South Pacific’ and she blew me away.” Later, in 1979, as a high school senior, Lawrence sang at Dollar’s wedding.

“Sharon is one of those actors who keeps reinventing herself in the acting world,” Dollar says. “What sets her apart is her ability to adapt to so many different characters. She was an old soul even when she was 17.”

Her talent impressed her professors in Chapel Hill as well.

“If I remember correctly, she sang her résumé, which was wonderful because she had a Broadway-level voice,” recalls John Sweeney, a professor in advertising at UNC’s School of Journalism and Mass Communication.

During summers while she was in college, Lawrence gained more acting skills. She worked in Blowing Rock on the musical stage at the Farm House restaurant. Before her junior and senior years, at Southeastern Theatre Conferences (SETC), she learned a series of shows to perform, a different one each night of the week. That gave her the opportunity to play such roles as Marion Paroo in “The Music Man,” Anne in “A Little Night Music” and Catherine in “Pippin.” Her confidence grew as she held her own against professional actors from New York City dur-

ing her summers with SETC.

Lawrence explains her success, “You can easily look at those you admire in a two-dimensional way, on a screen, but when you’re in the same room with them, you understand that they’re not that different from you, and you start to imagine your success.”

#### **Learning the ropes in New York, yet not far from home**

After graduating from UNC-CH in 1983 with a bachelor’s degree from the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, Lawrence created a five-year plan, moving to New York City with the intention of pursuing a career in advertising if Broadway didn’t work out.

“But I did find work and found out that part of my spirit was really driven and enticed by getting to know people who were working on Broadway,” she says.

Even though she moved out of the state after completing college, Lawrence remained close to friends from Carolina, including several from her sorority, Alpha Chi Omega. Twelve years after graduating she received an Outstanding Young Alumni Award from UNC-CH.

Her cousin, Camille Sowder, now a sophomore English and psychology major at UNC-CH says, “It’s inspiring to see how Carolina is still influencing her life today. She’s still very connected with Carolina alumni. To me as a student, it’s inspiring to know that I’m forming relationships here that will continue to shape my life in the future.”

In New York City, Lawrence balanced her days between auditioning for Broadway shows and waitressing to maintain steady work. In 1987, she debuted on Broadway in the “Cabaret,” directed by Harold Prince.

“Her guts to live in New York City scared me to death,” Earlyn Lawrence, says.

“She had lived a sheltered lifestyle. Within a full year of being out of college, she learned how to take care of herself. She kept herself safe—that I’m very proud of.”

#### **Moving to Los Angeles and television**

She lived in New York for eight years. Then at 30, Lawrence moved to Los Angeles to seek more complex roles.

“As a young actress, I was successful because I followed my gut,” Lawrence says. “Some was chance, but a lot of it was being a self-starter—taking a leap.”

In the early ‘90s, TV was changing. Less glitzy shows replaced the once popular genre of glamour, seen in “Dallas” and “Dynasty.”

“The people were real, and I saw myself doing those roles,” Lawrence says. “That was another reason I changed course. The idea of television really appealed to me.”



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And she appealed to television, appearing in “Law & Order: SVU,” “Fired Up,” “Grey’s Anatomy” and “Drop Dead Diva.” Lawrence won a Screen Actors Guild Award for “NYPD Blue” and earned Emmy nominations for other roles.

#### **Pursing goals beyond career**

As her fame grew, so did her involvement with charities. She currently serves as an active board member of Heal the Bay, a nonprofit environmental group working to restore Santa Monica Bay, California. As a scuba diver, Lawrence saw first-hand what climate-change does to coral reefs and became involved with ocean conservation. She also advocates for Women in Film, encouraging women to write, direct and lead the industry.

“We’re proud of her caring nature,” Tom Lawrence, Sharon’s father, says. “She gets very involved and takes whatever she’s involved with and proceeds with full gusto. She cares about people and causes.”

Lawrence’s passionate approach to her career, service and life in general are reasons why she is successful today.

#### **Returning to North Carolina**

Lawrence travels back to North Carolina to visit her family, but she has also worked in the state. Recently, she returned to film “One Tree Hill.”

“It’s one of the best experiences I’ve had on location,” she says. “I fell in love with Wilmington. Three months in the fall—the water is still warm. The skies are clear. It’s amazing.”

Although Sharon Lawrence has moved away from North Carolina to pursue her career, her roots continue to deepen as she returns to visit and work in her home state.

*Profile written by a student in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, UNC-CH. Provided by the N.C. Press Foundation, [www.ncpress.com](http://www.ncpress.com).*