

HOPE



Ready for her close-up: Lawyer Gloria Allred's creative media antics have made her as famous as her clients (Amber Frey, Paula Jones, the family of Nicole Brown Simpson).

A PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHER
TURNED CRUSADING
(AND LIMELIGHT-
LOVING) ATTORNEY,
GLORIA ALLRED HIT HER STRIDE
AT MIDLIFE—AND HAS YET TO
STOP FOR BREATH

&

GLORIA

By ART HARRIS
Photography by
DAN WINTERS

It's 7 AM on the last Friday in September when the gray Lancia rolls down Via Sistina and pulls up to the five-star InterContinental hotel. Rome is waking up to the aroma of rich espresso laced with exhaust fumes and to the furies of an American feminist lawyer on a mission. Gloria Allred has come to Italy to make sure an accused killer doesn't walk, and to single-handedly show her two grandchildren a real Roman adventure. "I don't do nannies," she says with a sniff. "Never did."

While the teenagers sleep off jet lag, Allred's off to see the prosecutor, a translator named Rosella in tow. Italian journalists are on strike, but she's camera-ready, just in case: elegant in a power red (of course) St. John suit, black turtle-neck, gold necklace, matching earrings and frog brooch.

"People think of me as the court of last resort," she says matter-of-factly. "They say, 'When all else fails, call Gloria Allred.'" She's not joking. Allred's law practice is booming, along with her notoriety, due in no small part to her willingness to suit up and show up whenever a TV producer calls. This flair for high drama keeps her firm's

coffers filled, allowing Allred to indulge her passion for avenging injustice—especially against women and minorities. From truck drivers to movie stars to belly dancers, secretaries, prostitutes, people with AIDS, factory workers and television executives, they all seek solace from Gloria, whose Los Angeles-based firm, Allred, Maroko & Goldberg, specializes in family and employment law. Even right-wing stalwarts—no names, please—eat crow to recruit the ultraliberal former National Organization for Women chapter president when their husbands betray them. “And I’m happy to help,” she says with a smile.

“*Avanti!*” exclaims her driver, Enrico, weaving around wimpy Vespas as he roars off toward the Palace of Justice. At last, after seven years of pressing Italian prosecutors to file murder charges against the man who allegedly killed his American girlfriend, Toni Dykstra, during a custody dispute, it’s showtime: the preliminary hearing for Carlo Ventre. And Allred aims not only to be there but to make sure he knows she’s on his case.

“Seven years is a long time, but it’s not so long in Italy,” remarks Rosella, shrugging at Allred’s five transatlantic treks on behalf of Dykstra’s family.

Dykstra and her grieving family a terrible wrong. Had Scott Peterson killed Laci in Italy, “he’d still be a free man,” says Allred, who’s lawyered for Peterson’s ex-mistress, Amber Frey. (She has also represented the families of O.J. Simpson’s murdered wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, and Michael Jackson’s 1993 accuser; a woman who claims Arnold Schwarzenegger once groped her; alleged Bill Clinton gropee Paula Jones; Robert Blake’s first wife; a man mauled by chimps at an animal sanctuary; a woman attacked by Courtney Love.)

Suplicants don’t simply petition Allred in the hope of winning a case. They call because the fearless, tireless (and, some would say, shameless) 64-year-old firebrand is also exquisitely adept at spinning cases in that all-important court of public opinion. “She has the innate ability to reduce legal issues to a rather basic level, where the average person can relate to it,” one of her law partners, Mike Maroko, tells me. “Even if it may sometimes seem silly”—like the time she sued a Los Angeles bistro for giving women menus with no prices on them. (She won.)

“I’d tell her, ‘Gloria, you demean yourself going on weird talk shows with obnoxious people,’”

W O M E N PITCH ALLRED ON THE STREET, AT THE GROCERY STORE, EVEN FROM THE NEXT STALL OVER IN THE LADIES’ ROOM.

The 29-year-old paralegal and single mother of three died at her ex’s apartment when she came to Rome in 1998 to retrieve her kidnapped two-year-old daughter, Santina.

Allred intends to hand over files proving Dykstra had warned American authorities that Ventre, a balding, 57-year-old plumbing supplies salesman she once lived with, had threatened to kill her long before their fatal encounter. (He denies this and says she died accidentally during a fall when attacking *him*.) A judge at the time said there wasn’t enough evidence to bring charges. Five months passed before Dykstra’s body was released to her family in California and more than a year before Allred, accompanied by an FBI agent, was allowed to fly Santina back to Dykstra’s father and stepmother in the States.

“It’s such an outrage,” Allred says. “Toni would be alive today if the system hadn’t failed her.”

“She’s vicious,” spits Carlo Ventre, who calls his antagonist a grandstanding “devil lawyer.” “All she cares about is money and publicity!”

IF ITALIANS ARE FROM VENUS, Gloria is from Mars. “She is a warrior,” says former Los Angeles District Attorney Robert Philibosian. “Gloria really believes in everything she does.” And she is convinced that the Roman authorities have done Toni

says childhood friend Fern Brown Caplan, now a Philadelphia family court hearing officer who presides over custody disputes. “She’d say, ‘You may not watch them, but others do. It’s how I get my message across.’” Now Allred will see how well her hang-’em-high persona and shock-and-awe media tactics play in Italy.

Ventre may have the home-court advantage, but Allred is armed not only with documents but also a crew from CBS’s *48 Hours Mystery*, which is producing a show about the case that she hopes will help stoke American outrage about Dykstra’s death and, not incidentally, help sell copies of her new book, *Fight Back and Win: My Thirty-Year Fight Against Injustice—and How You Can Win Your Own Battles*, due out this month.

“*Prego*,” barks Enrico, taking cell-phone orders to deposit Allred near the justice building. She pops into a café, grabs a croissant and orange juice, and hunkers down to rehearse what she wants to tell prosecutor Giancarlo Capaldo.

“Do you speak any Italian?” I ask.

“*Margarita pizza!*” she answers with a laugh.

Then she turns to the translator: “How do you say: ‘Tell the truth in the name of God?’”

“*La prego, dire la verità in nome de Dio*,” Rosella says, scribbling it on a legal pad. Allred repeats it over and over.



Agita! Allred in Rome, September 2005, raises hell on behalf of American murder victim Toni Dykstra.



"Do not let adversity break you," Allred counsels. "Think of it as a learning experience that will make you stronger."

"Are you going to put that one to Carlo?" I ask. "How'd you guess?" she smiles mischievously.

CARLO VENTRE ISN'T THE FIRST to accuse Allred of being a publicity-hungry meddler. When she lobbied to remove Michael Jackson's children from Neverland after the baby-dangling incident, I heard the pop star drop his meek falsetto two octaves in the street outside his molestation trial to growl, "Gloria Allred can go to hell!"

"He wants me to go to hell. I want him to go to parenting class," she retorts.

She is similarly unperturbed by lawyer Mark Geragos's recent intimations on *Larry King Live* that Allred's relentless media diatribes against Scott Peterson conveniently skirted the gag order placed on Amber Frey. "I heard what he said," she responds with a grin. "Like he didn't think I'd be watching! All I can say is, Amber Frey had a lawyer, and as a result she testified successfully and got a book and movie deal. Scott Peterson got a lawyer and was convicted of double murder, and now he's sitting on death row. He has to be asking himself, 'How much worse off could I be had I not gotten Mark Geragos and represented myself?'"

She dismisses the trash talk—media whore, master manipulator, control freak—as evidence of "petty jealousies from other lawyers who aren't that successful."

"No one ever called Johnnie Cochran a control

freak for being there when O.J. was interviewed," she tells me. "No client of mine has ever complained." Indeed. Before Frey's book tour in early 2005, I was on a television reporting assignment in Fresno, interviewing assorted family and friends, including a local promoter-surfer dude who was hawking purported Amber sex tapes. Within an hour of our rendezvous, my cell phone rang. Gloria.

"He has zero credibility," she snaps. "He's been trying to sell that garbage all over town. I'd be very disappointed if you put him on the air." Her voice turns icy. "Let's just say it could jeopardize your future interview with Amber."

When I remind Gloria months later how she tried to strong-arm me—her old pal!—she pleads memory loss.

"Gloria takes no prisoners," says Fern Brown Caplan, who laughs when I tell her the story. I confess my feelings were hurt—until I flipped on Court TV one day and watched Gloria rebuff her own daughter, anchor Lisa Bloom:

"Sorry, Lisa," she says, refusing to cough up a deposition by her client Sondra Kerr Blake, Robert Blake's first wife. "You know I can't."

"Even my own mama won't give it up!" responds Lisa, laughing. "But I had to ask."

"WE'RE LIKE A PRIVATE ATTORNEY GENERAL," says Allred, estimating that her firm handles more discrimination lawsuits on the West Coast than the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Scoring a spot on her calendar amid the hundreds of calls for help each month is not easy, but if the issue resonates as a significant deprivation of rights or, better yet, is temptingly controversial, she's on it. A recent caseload included a sexual harassment suit (against Hooters, on behalf of 57 waitresses who said they were spied on while changing) and a raft of discrimination claims based on age, sex, race and HIV status. As this issue of *More* went to press, Allred was pursuing a lawsuit on behalf of two gay couples (one male, one female) who were challenging California's same-sex marriage ban.

For decades Allred has been using her media savvy to gain attention for favorite causes; back in 1985 she publicized—quite literally—the problem of deadbeat dads when she convinced then-D.A. Philibosian to print the names of parents who had failed to pay child support. "I thought it was a great idea," Philibosian says. "She knows how to bring attention to legitimate issues," including amnesty for fathers who made good on support. "That was her idea too."

"Gloria is a miracle worker," says Sylvia Guerrero, whose 17-year-old child, Gwen Araujo, was murdered in October **continued on page 169**



Advise and present: Allred comforts actor Robert Blake's ex-wife, Sondra Kerr Blake, during a press conference in June 2001.

HOPE & GLORIA
continued from page 105

2002 by some male friends who bashed her head in with a shovel after they discovered that she was biologically male. After the murder, Allred helped the family keep the media at bay and countered the initial story—that the victim was a sleazy, promiscuous cross-dresser—with a sympathetic portrait of a misunderstood teen. Araujo’s case soon became a rallying cry for transgender civil rights, and last September, two of the defendants were convicted of second-degree murder.

Allred won’t discuss her fees, but Mike Maroko says the firm generates about \$20 million a year in settlements and awards for clients, mostly from contingency cases, and much of it thanks to Allred as rainmaker and media threat. Women pitch her on the street, at the grocery store, in restaurants. One desperate stranger asked—from an adjacent stall in the ladies’ room—for Allred to slip her a card.

Hanging with Gloria is like traveling with a rock star. When I flew up to

Oakland with her for closing arguments in the Araujo murder trial, a taxi driver recognized her and asked, “Hey, whatever happened to that Peterson dude?” He was speeding us across the Bay Bridge to NBC studios in San Francisco for an interview with Rita Cosby. Allred knew little about the topic (Olivia Newton-John’s missing boyfriend), so she requested some clips to review on the way. This three-hour side trip ends up yielding a big 90 seconds of airtime. On the plane back to L.A., she skims *Doonesbury* as a flight attendant hovers. “I’m in awe of your legal talent,” she says. “Could I possibly get a picture with you, Mrs. Allred?”

GLORIA RACHEL BLOOM grew up poor in a Philadelphia row house. Her mother, Stella, was English and a homemaker who loved to dance. Her father, Morris, a Russian Jew, sold Fuller brushes and photo portrait prints door-to-door 12 hours a day, six days a week. Both had eighth-grade educations and doted on their only child.

If Morris had money to buy only one movie ticket, he would send Gloria inside and wait on a park bench. “He never complained about anything,” Allred recalls. Not even after he was so badly beaten during a robbery he nearly died. Bleeding, he took the trolley home (to save money) and then told Gloria, “I had some bad luck today.”

“That’s where I get my strength,” she says. Allred’s parents scrimped to send her to elite Girls’ High in Philadelphia, whose Latin motto means “She conquers, who conquers herself.”

At a freshman mixer at the University of Pennsylvania, where she was an English major, Gloria met Peyton Bray, a sexy California blueblood who knew how to make her laugh. They married in 1960—Gloria was a sophomore—and had Lisa soon after. By her senior year, they were divorced. “It wasn’t supposed to happen to a Girls’ High girl, getting pregnant,” Allred says. “But he was extremely handsome, blond, blue-eyed, brilliant and had an incredible sense of humor.” Friends say he treated

her badly. "Let's just say he was emotionally abusive," is her only comment.

After graduation, Allred found work as an assistant buyer for Gimbels, then began teaching at a tough all-boys high school in Philadelphia. "They were just like me," she says. "Their parents didn't have any money, and they wanted to learn." She earned a master's in English education, scraping by on little or no child support, then decided if she was going to be poor, it might as well be in the sunshine—California, where her ex-mother-in-law offered to help. After the L.A. riots ("a rebellion," as Allred prefers to call them), she taught school in Watts. "I wanted my students to love success, not fear failure, and it worked," she says.

Allred also took care to instill her work ethic and a healthy dose of chutzpah in her daughter, Lisa, who recalls running home in tears after being banned from square dancing in fourth grade because of a girls-can't-wear-pants-and-dance rule. Mama marched her right back to school and complained. The principal quickly caved.

"A lot of mothers would have dried my tears and made cupcakes," says Bloom, who took her mother's maiden name after graduating Yale Law School. "Mine never cared whether I had a nice manicure or if my room was clean. She cares that I am treated right at work and make as much or more than male counterparts. She cares about substance." Allred also encouraged her daughter to be independent. "She always said, 'Men should be the icing on the cake, not the main event,'" Bloom says.

In 1968, Gloria married William Allred, a wealthy businessman who manufactured airplane parts for the military. He provided both emotional and financial support when, at 30, she decided, after becoming a labor organizer for women teachers, that she could more effectively agitate for change if she became an attorney. Nervous about competing with the "kids" at Loyola Law School in Los Angeles, Allred put a flashlight in her purse and headed for the library in the predawn darkness so she could be there when it opened.

After graduating in 1974, Allred worked briefly for Jerry Brown's gubernatorial campaign, then hung out her shingle with classmates Michael Maroko and Nathan Goldberg. The company, which started as a general practice, soon began adding more sex-discrimination and harassment suits to its case load. "There was such an enormous need," she recalls, "yet so few firms were doing what we did."

Not long after, when her activism earned her the presidency of NOW's Los Angeles chapter, Allred was already racing for the mics: She actually mowed down a fellow NOW officer, lawyer Shelly Mandell, on the courthouse steps. "The audacity of Gloria stunned me," Mandell says. "She was just way faster than me!" One day in 1979, Lisa and her stepdad couldn't find Gloria; they flipped on the TV and there was Mom, leading a protest against a local Savon Drugs because its toy advertising featured play money and cash registers for boys, while the girls got fake vacuum cleaners.

At a 1981 California State Senate hearing on antiabortion legislation, Allred produced a black leather chastity belt for the bill's sponsor, John Schmitz. He responded by firing off a press release stating that his committee had been besieged by an "Attack of the Bull Dykes," a crowd of "hard, Jewish and (arguably) female faces" that included "slick butch lawyeress Gloria Allred." She won a libel suit, an apology and a \$20,000 settlement. Allred celebrated by delivering a frog to his office. "I was offended he'd held a news conference on a Jewish holiday [Passover]," she says.

Theatrics aside, the issue affected her deeply; during her testimony about the legislation, Allred revealed publicly for the first time that, in 1966, she was raped at gunpoint during a vacation in Mexico, became pregnant, and nearly died after a back-alley abortion. "I've had many of the same experiences my clients have had," she reflects, "so I feel a lot of empathy for them. I don't want women to go through what I did."

By her mid-forties, Allred was fast becoming a national icon; in 1984, *Time* called her one of America's "most

effective advocates of family rights and feminist causes." But in 1987, the articles about Allred took a disturbingly personal turn when her by-then estranged husband Bill was jailed for selling counterfeit parts to the air force. His disgrace, as well as the couple's split, made news. For Allred, it was more than a heartbreak; it was humiliating. Even today, almost 20 years later, she won't discuss it, except to say, "I was married, I was divorced, that's the end of the story."

"She felt so betrayed," says Fern Brown Caplan. "And you don't betray Gloria."

"SHE SAYS, 'I don't have time for friends,'" notes Caplan, who wonders if perhaps Allred "keeps herself busy so she doesn't get lonely."

"I've never been lonely in the last 40 years," Allred insists. "Some of the loneliest people are married. I had a neighbor say, 'I've been watching you through your window, and it's so sad, you're alone! I never feel alone . . . surrounded by excitement and adventures and ideas. I love my clients and my cases.'"

And the cameras that never stop whirring. Even as Allred took her seat in business class on the flight to Rome last fall, her 16-year-old granddaughter, Sarah, was shooting video for the *48 Hours* crew. "This is my life," Allred says. "Who'd have ever thought one day I'd be on a plane to Italy being interviewed by my granddaughter!"

At this stage of life, some women might savor a romantic trip like this with a husband, a partner. Not Allred. "Oh, I should be on a date?" she scoffs. "Why would I do that when I have a date with justice?" Allred works too late, gets up too early, travels too much "to make that investment." She bubbles confidence, exudes energy. She's sexy. And when men hit on her (which she concedes they do)?

"I haven't taken any vows of celibacy. But two marriages were enough. I'm married to my work. I've never been happier in my life.

"I'm not saying others should live like me. This is just the way I'm living it. I have nothing against sex, just

sexism.” Suddenly, she laughs; she’s got *the* sound bite: “I’m not looking for Mr. Right. I’m too busy dealing with Mr. Wrongs! How’s that?”

AT PIAZZALE CLODIO, inside the Tribunale di Roma, an assistant ushers Allred into a back room, where prosecutor Giancarlo Capaldo sits hunched behind his desk. He has pale white skin and a pained expression. Capaldo has prosecuted drug cartels, war criminals, a former Chilean dictator in absentia, but doesn’t seem to know quite what to make of Allred. She takes a seat, eyeing his bonsai trees and primitive paintings of nudes.

Carlo Ventre, who returned to the U.S. in 1999 when Allred flew Santina home to California, was convicted of kidnapping and spent a year in an American prison. With kidnapping charges still pending in Italy, he fought extradition but was deported in July 2005. Allred is here to offer evidence she feels warrants a much more serious charge—the murder of Santina’s mother, Toni Dykstra.

Through a translator, she states with rapid-fire force her problems with the autopsy. Capaldo shrugs and asks for any solid evidence fingering Ventre. Allred wants to know whether Capaldo has Toni Dykstra’s statements “that Carlo was trying to kill her? I offered him those in 1999.” She proffers the same case file she tells me she gave him years ago. He says it’s useless unless it comes via an Italian attorney.

“It’s the bureaucracy,” says Capaldo’s translator, via speakerphone.

“Don’t tell me it’s red tape,” Allred snaps. “I came here to cut through all that.” If Ventre is convicted of voluntary murder, he could face up to 24 years in prison, Capaldo says. Custody of Santina, now 10, was awarded to Ventre’s brother, who lives in Las Vegas. The Dykstras have visitation rights. On Capaldo’s advice, Allred agrees to find an Italian legal team to help represent the family’s interests.

The meeting is over, and, eager to get to the hearing, she is off on a sprint, darting in and out of courtrooms until she finds Ventre’s. She slips into a back row. No one notices. Then the alleged

killer spies her in back . . . and smiles. Allred whips out a large photo of Toni, blonde and pretty, and holds it high overhead. Now, a commotion. Ventre fumes, points. The hearing is over. He is still not formally charged, but a date is set for another hearing (which, at press time, was postponed to late December 2005). Allred stalks him in the hall, gets in his face. “*La prego, dire la verità in nome de Dio!*” she chants, over and over, in Italian and English.

“You don’t believe in God!” Ventre responds. “You came to harass me.” He stops in the courtyard, where his two lawyers close in on Allred. I sidle up to the accused. “What’s going on?” I ask him, and he launches into his rant about Allred as devil lawyer in “the business of hate.”

“Carlo knows a lot more about the devil than I do,” Allred scoffs. “Being that Toni is [with] the angels and I represent her.”

So, how did Dykstra die? “She fell because she was attacking me with an ax,” Ventre tells me. I ask about the autopsy, how Allred says Dykstra’s hands were never examined to determine whether she’d been holding an ax. “What it says is not a surprise,” Ventre responds cryptically. Then he does something that makes me think he has really lost it: He challenges Gloria to a debate, cameras allowed. “Ten questions, but not on the case,” he says. Allred accepts. As they walk toward the exit, the *48 Hours* cameras start rolling. As if on cue, Allred comes to life, again holding Toni’s photo up high. She’s loud. “Did you kill her? Tell the truth, how did she die? Tell me how she died!” One of Ventre’s lawyers threatens to call the police.

“This is *not* a talk show, Gloria,” Ventre hisses. “Quit being so aggressive!” She reminds him it was illegal to kidnap his daughter in the first place. “Gloria,” says Ventre, turning to the cameras like a semipro, “you are nothing but a street performer. You argue in the streets because you’ve never won a case in court.”

“Did you love her, Carlo?”

“Did you love your husbands?” he shouts, heading for his car, the thought of their debate clearly over.

“Did you kill her, Carlo?” She pursues him. “Tell us the truth!”

“It’s very unfair,” Ventre says. “I have no money. I had to take a public defender. I wish this were over. I’m so tired of it; it’s such an ordeal. She’s creating hate between families.”

“*Arrivederci, Carlo!*” Allred calls as Ventre drives away. She has come thousands of miles for a hearing that lasted two minutes. But she’s satisfied. And the *48 Hours* producers are ecstatic.

Back at the hotel, Allred bumps into a couple of friends: Ernest Borgnine and his wife, Tova. Ever patient, grandchildren Sam and Sarah wait in the lobby. “I know this sounds cheesy,” Sarah says, “but she’s, like, a good person. She makes me want to do something to help people.” Fourteen-year-old Sam marvels that they’re in Rome because “she’s concerned about our education.”

Then it’s off to the Trevi Fountain, Allred opting to toss in three coins rather than take a carriage ride for 100 euros. (“Ridiculous!”) I reveal what the kids said about her. She beams. “They’re a joy for me. You can’t say someone is important unless you make time for them. Deeds, not words.”

Touring the Colosseum, she chuckles at the notion of the vestal virgins. “You actually think they all kept their vows?” Even here, she can’t escape. “I want to thank you for what you do for women, it’s wonderful,” says a woman from Atlanta. “If I ever get in trouble, I’ll be calling you.”

Symbolic chains at the altar inside Saint Peter’s evoke other victims she has helped. “They were chaining pregnant inmates to hospital beds in the Los Angeles county jail,” Allred says. “We got them unchained.”

She looks around, marvels at so much magnificence, so much ruin. She looks at least 10 years younger than her 64 years, but says she is acutely aware of the clock ticking, and wants “to help as many people as possible in the time I have left.”

And how does she want her epitaph to read?

“Under here, we’re all equal.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.” **M**