

# The New York Times

## A Place to Hang Her Hats

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*CAN DO* At 93, Mimi Weddell, left, still goes to the gym, but she no longer works out on the rings; far left, her daughter, Sarah Dillon.

MIMI WEDDELL, model, actress and blithe spirit, is finally about to have her grand moment, as the subject of the documentary “Hats Off,” which opens Friday. As she is 93 and has been modeling on and off for decades, this is not an overnight success, but it is a tribute to her resilience.

“Rise above it!” is Ms. Weddell’s motto. You can see it on a piece of paper on her refrigerator door, and once upon a time you might have seen it written in ink on her kitchen floor. Her son’s daughter wrote it there when she was about 5, Ms. Weddell says. “The poor thing was leading such a restrictive life. I felt she wasn’t given a chance to do anything she wanted in her apartment.”

Ms. Weddell's daughter, Sarah Dillon, who lives with her, disputes her mother's story, something that happens with such zest and frequency it calls to mind "Grey Gardens."

"It looked like Mimi's handwriting," Mrs. Dillon was saying the other day, at her mother's apartment. She saw it when she came home from a summer trip to Maine, and she was appalled: "There was a big 'Rise Above It' on the floor."

Ms. Weddell amends her version slightly. "Maybe she was doing it first," she says, referring to her granddaughter. "Maybe I was doing it over. I wanted that child to have a feeling of freedom."

Enough of those young sylphs with their effortless posture. Let us celebrate the old ladies who go to the gym and stand on their heads, even as they shrink from 5 feet 7 inches to 5 feet and their backs become as rounded as teacups; the old dames who lose their husbands and have money troubles but cheerfully keep on keeping on, Energizer bunnies in gloves and hats.

Hats are central to Mimi Weddell's story. She estimates she has about 150 in the apartment. Some perch on chairs, free as parrots; others are constrained in boxes. They are part of the style that made her one of New York magazine's 50 most beautiful New Yorkers three years ago and brought in the Vuitton ad and the bit parts in films.

It is not a life that has brought riches. Ms. Weddell's income from acting and modeling in 2006 was \$20,406, although she had health problems that year.

Ms. Weddell lives in an Upper East Side co-op she bought decades ago. Mrs. Dillon, 54, a freelance book restorer, and her husband have lived with her for the last 20 years. (Mrs. Dillon does not give her husband's name; he does not want it known that he lives with his mother-in-law, she says.) Mother pays the \$2,000 monthly maintenance.

It is a large, rambling apartment — kitchen, dining room, two sitting rooms, three bedrooms — with comfortable, well-worn furnishings. There's a grandfather clock in one corner of a sitting room; an adjoining sitting room has racks of Ms. Weddell's clothing and stacks of hatboxes.

Pinning down Ms. Weddell's story is tricky. There is a character in fiction known as the unreliable narrator, who, while not exactly a fabulist, cannot resist the impulse to sprinkle a story with fairy dust, and Ms. Weddell may fall into that category.

This may be the result of memory loss; it may come from a woman who prefers the light and amusing to the tedium of everyday life. Did Ms. Weddell's father, an adventurous son of the Mayflower in her telling, really forsake Boston society to pan for gold out West? Did Ms. Weddell, on the way to her husband's funeral, take time out to audition for a movie?

Ms. Weddell's daughter, attempting to sort out the stories, is dismissed as earthbound.

"Sarah is a Scorpio," Ms. Weddell says, waving her cigarette in its holder (it may be a prop, as it remains unlighted for hours). "I believe in the stars. I was brought up with the stars. Because of my grandfather, I was taught the stars, because he was in the Navy, and —"

Forceful interruptions are required. Stop! Stick to the point! Divulge, if you will, that staple of the geriatric profile, the secret of your long, yet vital life. Recount your typical day, just the facts.

"Facts are not my mother's strong point," Mrs. Dillon says.

Her mother, meanwhile, is fretting: "Typical day? Do I have a typical day?"

The documentary, directed by Jyll Johnstone, was shot over 12 years and shows Mrs. Dillon working out at the gym on the rings. Does she still go?

“Nothing regular, but yesterday I went,” Ms. Weddell says. “Gymnastics I don’t do so much. And my bones have gotten so that I don’t go up on the rings anymore.”

Her daughter prompts: “You stand on your head.”

“I do stand on my head, always, always,” Ms. Weddell says. “I believe in getting the blood to my head. I have become spacey. That’s why I take my little brandy bottle.”

She gestures at a few small bottles around her chair. “I take a teaspoon of brandy when I feel spacey,” she says. “It makes me come alive.”

To Ms. Weddell’s story, as told: Her parents, both from old New England families, head west for adventure soon after their wedding, and Ms. Weddell is born in Williston, N.D., on Feb. 15, 1915. (“I’m pretty sure the same date as John Barrymore,” she says.)

When she is a few years old, Ms. Weddell is deposited back in New England, where she is shunted from relative to relative. Yes, dearie, she knows, that sort of thing is supposed to make one unhappy, but she loved it, because everyone adored her: Nana Rogers and Uncle Walter Savory, who was a painter, and Aunt Savory. They all loved taking her picture, which made her mother, who came east now and then, so angry she threw all the pictures away.

Why did it make her angry?

Ms. Weddell doesn’t know why. People did what they wanted then. There was no such thing as psychiatry; nobody was trying to put anybody in a little box.

There was a brief first marriage, but some things one doesn’t discuss: “Verboten.”

In 1946 she married Dick Weddell, who worked for RCA Victor. They had a son, Thomas, then daughter Sarah.

When Mr. Weddell lost his job, in the mid-1950s, it almost ruined them. They moved from Connecticut to the Upper East Side, where they rented a series of apartments, eventually buying this one, in 1970, Ms. Weddell believes, for either \$12,000 or \$17,000. Ms. Weddell worked office temp jobs and did occasional modeling gigs to keep the children in private school. Mr. Weddell died in 1981.

“And as I’m on my way to Dick’s funeral, the doorman said, ‘Take this call,’ and someone is saying, ‘Would you do a movie?’” Ms. Weddell says. “And I auditioned on the way to Dick’s service to do this big movie down in Houston.”

(The big movie, in case you’re wondering, was “Student Bodies,” in which a killer attacks high school kids having sex.)

There is some eye-rolling from the daughter. Does she dispute this story?

She does, Mrs. Dillon says — although since her mother had ordered her to Elizabeth Arden to get her hair done for the funeral service, she was not in the apartment at the time.

Her mother presses on. The day after the funeral, she went to Houston to begin filming.

“No, you didn’t,” Mrs. Dillon says. “I was home for six weeks and then you went to Houston.”

“You are crazy,” Ms. Weddell tells her daughter.

“*You* are crazy,” Mrs. Dillon says.

Ladies, please, let us go look at hats. There’s a Lily Daché from the ’30s and an old Adolpho of brown and white feathers. There’s a wide-brimmed hat of black tulle over wire mesh that evokes Dior. In the bedroom, still in its shopping bag, is a floppy white hat from Chanel. The price tag: \$495.

Can Ms. Weddell afford this?

“I’d sell myself for a hat,” she says.

“This is where it goes,” her daughter says, laughing. “It doesn’t go to bookshelves. It doesn’t go to utensils. When I mash the potatoes, a little bit of paint flakes off, because it’s from the ’40s. I pretend it’s nutmeg.”

What is it she so loves about hats?

“Hats give you a frame,” Ms. Weddell says. “However dreary you feel, if you put on a hat, by golly, you’ve changed everything. I keep telling my daughter, my granddaughter, everybody, ‘If you don’t wear a hat, you’re missing it.’ ”

Her daughter sighs.

“Oh, please,” she says.