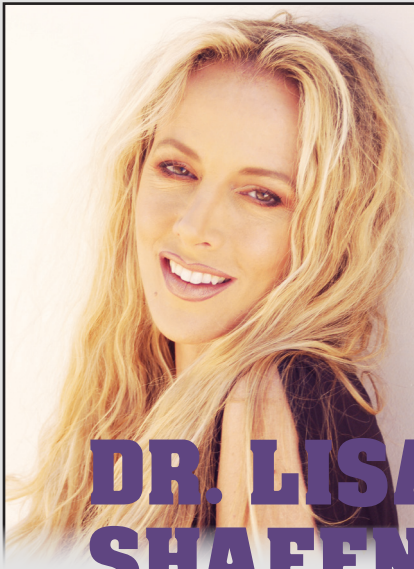


Immaculata

IMMACULATA UNIVERSITY • FALL 2013

PROFILES





DR. LISA L. SHAFFNER

Dr. Lisa L. Shaffner M.A. '04 has a cut-to-the-chase kind of charm. Having spent a decade as an actress and model in theater, commercials, film and television, she sums up her decision to leave the entertainment field and enter academia by stating, "I got tired of going to auditions in my bikini."

Shaffner grew up in Delaware and entered the American Academy of the Dramatic Arts in California right after high school. "I was out there for about 10 years and I did quite a bit, but with the rise of reality TV, there was just less and less work. I began to think about what it is I love to do and am good at that I'm not getting paid for. And, it occurred to me that I was the person everyone called to talk about their problems."

Shaffner admits that had she followed a more traditional route, she probably would have become a counselor. "I went to a seminar and heard a woman speak who had been in entertainment a long time and went back to college in her forties. She said it is never too late. Just do it. So I decided to go back to school, and I pretty much had to start from scratch."

After earning a bachelor's from Goldey-Beacom College in Wilmington, DE, Shaffner sought the right place to pursue her master's, and Immaculata stood out. "I was looking for a school that was APA-approved, and Immaculata's passing average for the national counselor's exam was really high. Because I had a 4.0 GPA, I didn't have to take the GREs, and IU was close enough to make the commute feasible."

Shaffner remembers her ethics course as being especially meaningful, drawing on its insights more frequently than she ever imagined. "The Sister who taught ethics was very human, very real. She just got into our brains. I never thought there would be so many situations in the counseling world where I would be faced with an ethical dilemma. I have gone back to that teaching again and again. It was such a good foundation, I thank God it was there."

Shaffner also noted that earning her master's in counseling psychology at IU was challenging. "It was hard! They're not kidding when they say students learn through rigor."

Before she had even finished her graduate work, Shaffner was recruited to teach abnormal psychology at Goldey-Beacom. "I was nervous because these were evening students, who tend to be more mature and returning for career enhancement. I thought I'd better be brilliant."

"But what helped me as a teacher was my experience as a student at IU. I felt I learned so much from the professors who were warm and approachable, so I adopted that style and it worked very well and has continued to work very well."

After getting her master's, Shaffner began the process for licensing. "I still had a long way to go. I had to put in thousands of hours under a supervisor before I could sit for the exam."

Finally, Shaffner was scheduled to take the test, which requires months of study in order to pass. As fate would have it, "Everything that could have gone wrong in my life did, and I did not study at all. I went into the exam cold. I was so sure I was going to fail. I went through the three-hour test in 30 minutes and figured I would just have to retake it."

A month later, Shaffner received notification that she had passed the national counselor's exam. "From my personal experience, Immaculata is definitely doing something right."

Shaffner went on to obtain her license and then not one, but three doctorates: one from the Intercultural Open University Foundation, and dual Ph.D.s from Universidad Azteca/Universidad Central de Nicaragua. From bit parts on *Baywatch* to brainy professor and therapist, Shaffner rewrote the script for her life and has been changing other people's lives ever since.

Much of her research involved at-risk youngsters from violent, abusive backgrounds. Initially discouraged by the lack of resources dedicated to programs designed to help these children, Shaffner took a step back and, in her trademark get-to-the-heart-of-the-matter way, she realized these kids were already mature in ways that other children were not. Instead of despairing over their loss of childhood innocence, Shaffner was determined to find a way to build on it.

"I had to dig deep and figure out what I could do, what anyone could do to help them. I listened to these youngsters, validated their stories, agreed that they had gotten a raw deal, but we were going to work with the strengths they had. I engaged in a kind of emancipation therapy. I wanted to emancipate these kids from their awful families, even if they still had to live with them for another couple of years. I needed to give them some optimism, develop their resiliency."

Shaffner believes the only way to give such children some hope is to "attach them to something more important." When she invited a friend who had survived a difficult past, turning hardship into artistic expression, to speak to a group of her kids, the results were amazing.

"My friend, a tattoo artist, is covered in these works of art and when he spoke to the kids, they were enraptured. As they got attached to something that they could do and wanted to do, they naturally calmed down. They became more invested in school because they began to view it as a means to an end. Finally, there was light at the end of the tunnel."

"Whatever the cost is of living the authentic life, I believe that living the lie will kill you slowly."

Even in the college classroom, Shaffner encounters students who are suffering from untreated trauma or the pain of soul-crushing cultural expectations. "I see inner city kids on athletic scholarship from troubled backgrounds with no health insurance or other resources, and I work to develop their resilience. I have international students from countries where women are allowed to attend college

because they are from a certain socio-economic level, and it increases their value on the marriage market. But some do not want that pre-arranged marriage. They have fallen in love with someone outside of their culture, but know by following that path, they will

be excommunicated in every way from their family."

Shaffner helps these young women ask the most difficult questions, weighing the costs of whatever life they choose. "I ask them, 'what would it be like to go ahead and live that pre-written script? What inside of you would die? How much of the real you would it cost?'

"I came across an article about hospice nurses who were interviewed to see if a 'deathbed theme' emerged in their work, and it does. People wish they had lived an authentic life instead of what others expected of them, or what they were 'supposed to do.' That's profound. Whatever the cost is of living the authentic life, I believe that living the lie will kill you slowly."

Because the issues can be so weighty, Shaffner knows that the demands of her work require she take regular breaks to relax and renew. "When I was at IU, they stressed that you have to take care of yourself, that everyone in counseling needs to guard against burnout. You can't look into the abyss without the abyss looking into you."

Shaffner unwinds by losing herself in nature, and indulging in her passion for collecting and restoring antiques. "I'm an antique-aholic. You have to have a way to get grounded and find some peace."

Shaffner is also engaged to be married and looking forward to becoming the mother of "a wonderful 11-year-old girl."

And her advice to anyone of any age? "I've found that big dreams aren't any harder to achieve than the practical ones. There were many things about being an actor that were much simpler than anything else I've done. It's just another career."

"No matter what the dream is—to be an astronaut, a football player, a musician—the thing you don't do looms up there. Unlived dreams will haunt you. If you pursue something and discover it's not what you thought it would be, that's fine. There are some things you have to find out for yourself."