

There's nothing different or special about me," Naomi Judd says to a visitor as she tools down Nashville streets in a big black limousine.

We beg to differ. The Ashland, Kentucky, native has just presented highlights of her rags-to-riches life to a group at Opryland Hotel. Distraught that her younger brother was dying, 17-year-old Naomi sought comfort from an older boy, became pregnant with Wynonna, married, moved to Hollywood, had Ashley, divorced, entered and exited an abusive relationship. She became a nurse and lived on a Kentucky mountaintop with her girls, plunked a guitar in her eldest daughter's hand, discovered they harmonized better than most, and headed to Nashville (at age 37) with \$200. They made it big as country music duo The Judds. She met and married former Elvis Presley backup singer Larry Strickland, was diagnosed and pronounced terminal with the liver disease Hepatitis C.

Luckily, this tale has a spunky heroine. Take, for example, the salvo she fired back at the doctor who told her she had two years to live. "I said, 'I am a member of the mainstream medical community, but you're not God. I'll buy your diagnosis that I have liver disease, but I ain't buying your prognosis. It's just your opinion.'" She conveys that philosophy when she speaks on

health and women's issues for the American Liver Research Foundation and other organizations. She's also producing a series of motivational tapes—*Personal Victory*—to reach an even larger audience.

"The only thing you have control over is yourself," she says. "Peace is being comfortable with where you are and what you are doing." As for her own status, she grins and says, "God and I decided to go for a cure."

At 53, Naomi is striking with her trademark red tresses, porcelain skin, violet blue eyes, and sculpted cheeks. Whether she is speaking to a medical group or a television audience, her gorgeous features draw attention first. Then her sharp-edged intellect and self-described "goofy" personality reel them in. As one audience

member puts it, "You feel like you're her friend."

Her fame is equaled by her daughters'. Wynonna has soared as a solo country music artist. Emmy-nominated Ashley is a feature film favorite. Both daughters have houses near Naomi and Larry's home, situated on 1,000 acres of family land in Leipers Fork, a tiny community outside Nashville.

On this day, Naomi is involved in a photography

session for her cookbook, *Naomi's Home Companion*. Husband Larry and daughter Ashley float in and out, awaiting their turn in front of the camera. Wynonna is at her house, regrouping from yesterday's photo shoot.

Despite the adoration Naomi and her daughters evoke, no celebrity-types live here. "She and Larry are two of the nicest people that you'd ever want to meet," attests Dorothy

Newcome, who, with her husband, Steve, maintains the house and grounds. "They're thoughtful and generous. They are like my family. They do the typical stuff."

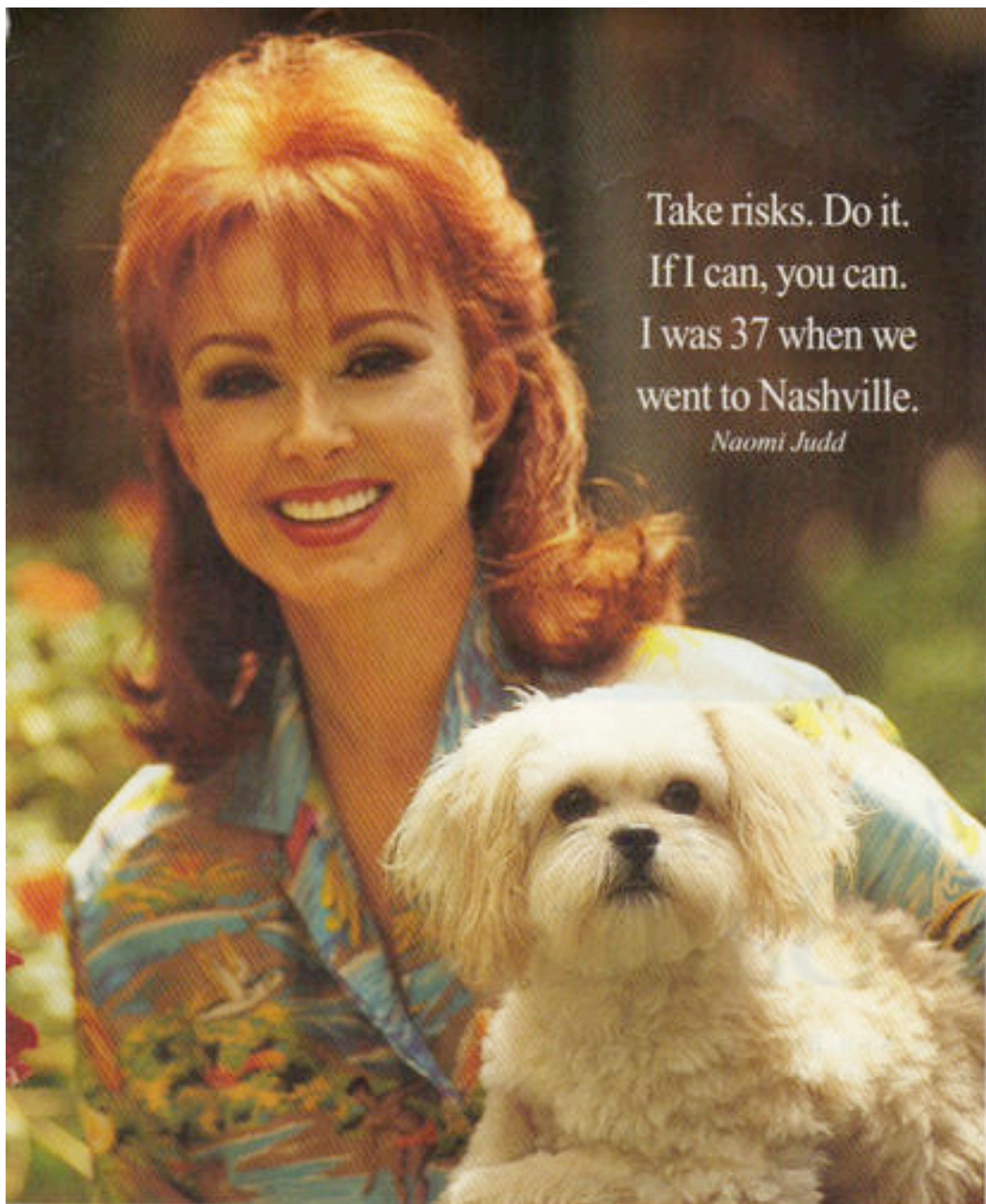
"We have fall festivals back at Wynonna's lake," Naomi says. "At dusk, we sit around this bonfire and we have a headless horseman come up. Then we have a man dressed as a scarecrow, slumped over a chair with a big bowl of

Living in Harmony

BY NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON
PHOTOGRAPHY ART MERIPOL



"Take off your mask and do what you want to do with your life. Spend time with yourself. Simplify."



Take risks. Do it.
If I can, you can.
I was 37 when we
went to Nashville.

Naomi Judd

candy in his lap. As people come over to get candy, he grabs their hand and lets out a scream."

Both Thanksgiving and Christmas are more sedate. "Thanksgiving is really about being with your family," says Naomi. At Christmas, the story of Jesus' birth is read at the barn, among "the wee beasties." And the Fourth of July shindig has Naomi passing out Declaration of Independence handouts to be read aloud. "They think I'm real corny," she says, "but they love it."

Whether it's holiday or day-to-day planning, leg-

ends surround Naomi's organizational skills. Take, for instance, her six closets, where clothes and shoes to match are lined up by season and color.

Ashley comes in and silently spreads out photos of designer dresses for her mother's perusal. "It has dotted swiss," the actress comments on one.

"Ashley, that's indecent," counters her mother. "You ain't wearing that."

It sounds a bit like a mother and daughter discussing prom night, except in this case the event is the Academy Awards.

However, Hollywood is

a long way from Leipers Fork once Naomi steps from in front of the camera. She changes into an orange shirt, purple pants, cat-eyed glasses, and slippers—and still looks great.

She appears so mellow, it would be easy to assume her life is without strife. But there have been disappointments. For instance, she and Larry opened a Nashville restaurant, Trilogy, but had to close it after a year. As manager of both Naomi's and Wynonna's careers, Larry found the restaurant business very hands-on, and thus too time-consuming.

"The night we closed, I made him come home at 5 o'clock," Naomi says.

"She had dinner ready and candles," says Larry.

"I took the phone off the hook, and we took some deep breaths and did our blessing," Naomi recalls. "I said, 'This is what life is really made of, ordinary moments.'"

"Some things are priceless and one of them is what you model for your kids," she adds. "Wynonna and Ashley saw us turning off the treadmill, saying money is not our god. What we care about above everything is being able to enjoy our life."

And the place they most enjoy it is on the family farm. "We have a contract with Wynonna and Ashley that this will always be our family land," Naomi says. "We already have permission to start a family cemetery so that everybody can be buried here."

"That way, the tour buses can come to the grave site," Larry deadpans.

Naomi laughs uproariously at her husband's joke, then returns again to the conversational theme she started in the limo: "I've always felt like I'm just the average person's representative," she says. "When I turned 50, I said I wouldn't take a million dollars for what I know now. I'm comfortable in my own skin, I've got a fabulous marriage, my farm is paid for, and my daughters and I are each other's best friends." ♦