

WINTER 2016

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO DALLAS

# DALLAS

HOTEL MAGAZINE

DALLAS-BORN  
ACTRESS

## Brooke Burns

HER INCREDIBLE JOURNEY

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# Against **All** **ODDS**

Native Dallasite Brooke Burns rises above injuries, setbacks to maintain successful Hollywood career.

BY ROBERT PIPER

**B**ROOKE BURNS BURNS DALLAS from start to finish. She grew up muddin' in a four-wheeler, two steppin' at the honky-tonk, and chowin' down at some of the finest restaurants in Big D. Viewers know her larger-than-life personality from *The Chase* game show, her leading role on *The Gourmet Detective*, and her appearances in a long list of top television shows dating back to *Ally McBeal* and *Baywatch*.

What viewers may not know, however, is that, in 2005, Burns survived a devastating diving accident in which her neck was fractured. Although statistics show 90% of spinal injuries result in spinal injury and paralysis, the actress was extremely fortunate; she made a full recovery and was able to return to work and continue a successful acting career. Today, she shares her experience to raise awareness of spinal cord injuries for several charitable organizations, including Life Rolls On, a non-profit organization dedicated to improving the quality of life for young people affected by

spinal cord injury or living with paralysis.

Burns' childhood, although happy, hid a harbinger of physical woes to come. Burns and her mother Betsy, younger sister Beth and older sister Becky grew up attending Sojourn Church, a church her father Brad founded with a fellow classmate from Southern Methodist University. Burns began ballet studies at age 3 and, from kindergarten through seventh grade, attended Trinity Christian Academy in the Dallas suburb of Addison. From eighth grade through graduation, Burns was homeschooled, as her increasingly demanding ballet studies required scheduling flexibility. The Dallas native knew early on that her life would be that of a performer, not in front of a camera, but on a stage, performing as a ballerina.

At age 15, Burns had 12 years of ballet study under her tutu and was performing with the Dallas Metropolitan Ballet when her anterior cruciate ligament was torn in a skiing accident.

Any future she may have had as a professional ballet dancer ended that day. Burns said the loss of ballet as a career was the hardest obstacle she had to overcome.

"I think it was because of my age—you know, I was only 15 years old and my identity was as a dancer, and my identity was challenged as a teenager—that I thought life was threatening and devastating," Burns said. "At the same time, I feel like that was one of the very first things that did give me that opportunity to say 'Are you gonna crumble here? Or maybe God has another destiny for your life. And it's a different road than what you may think it is.'"

After the skiing accident, the Burns family moved to Europe. Upon her return to the U.S., Burns shifted her focus to a new endeavor, one that morphed into a major milestone for her acting career. Shaking off depression from the loss of dance as a career choice, she became a model with Page Parkes Center of Modeling and Acting. There, Burns built the primary foundation for her



Burns and director Gavin O'Connor at the 2011 Los Angeles premiere of O'Connor's film *Warrior*. The couple wed in 2013.



The Burns family in their Dallas home. Left to right: Betsy, Brooke, Becky and Brad.

future acting career. She began modeling and appeared in commercials, then connected with agents in Los Angeles, New York and, later, Europe.

One of Burns' first repeat roles was that of Jennifer Higgin in the hit TV show *Ally McBeal*. A breakthrough role as Jessie Owens in *Baywatch* followed; she remained in the role for three years, then was cast as Nicole Booth in *North Shore*. But, in 2005, a devastating accident halted her second career choice.

Every night after dinner at her Los Angeles home, Burns would swim in her pool as part of a health regimen designed to keep her fit. One night, Burns decided to dive in, but a light in the black-bottomed pool was out, and she misjudged the angle, hitting the bottom head first. A visiting friend, who was a trained firefighter and paramedic, was on the scene. He immobilized her neck and held her in the

pool, with her head above water, until paramedics arrived. His actions preserved her mobility and were possibly life-saving, as well.

The decade following the diving accident held many challenges, including a divorce and news she would never be able to bear children. However, she proved physicians wrong with the birth of her daughter, Madison, declaring it "the most god-like moment I've ever experienced." Now, Burns' bio on Twitter proclaims, "Above all else...MOM."

Today, the actress enjoys a new outlook on life. She says she has found deeper meaning in her relationships with family members, including her daughter and husband Gavin O'Connor, a Hollywood movie director producer, and screenwriter.

Burns continues to work on new projects, explaining, "We

just came out with the fourth season of *The Chase* for GSN [Game Show Network], and our second *Gourmet Detective* for Hallmark Movies and Mysteries just aired; we'll be shooting a third one in October...." Burns also reveals she's working on a new line of "spiritual jewelry."

Fans should expect to see a lot more of Burns in the future, both on-screen and in her hometown. When returning to Big D for visits, she may be found at favorite haunts Bubba's Cooks Country, the Black-Eyed Pea, Goff's Hamburgers, Sonny Bryan's Smokehouse and The Original Pancake House. Although now a California resident, it's clear that for this Texas girl, Dallas will always be in her DNA.

**DHM**