

MODEL CITIZEN

With her unmistakable smile and high cheekbones, Christy Turlington was a '90s supermodel sensation. These days, she's leading a movement to make childbirth safe for every mother.

BY CHARIS TORRANCE



Christy at 23, modelling Chanel during Paris Fashion Week 1992.

Back in the age of the supermodel, Christy Turlington was one of the seven fashion models who – as Linda Evangelista famously put it – ‘wouldn’t get out of bed for less than \$10 000 a day’.

Today, Christy is celebrated for more than being one of the original supermodels who redefined the fashion industry. She is also the founder of Every Mother Counts (EMC), a non-profit dedicated to making pregnancy and childbirth safer for every mother, everywhere.

Founded in 2010, EMC was born out of Christy’s own experience of childbirth and her growing awareness of the international maternal health crisis. Every two minutes, a woman somewhere around the world dies from maternal-related causes – that’s more than 800 women every day. ‘I knew I had to do something when I realised that 98% of maternal deaths are preventable,’ she says.

EMC works to provide access to essential healthcare, supports community-based programmes and advocates for policy changes to address the systemic issues contributing to maternal mortality.

Christy’s commitment to maternal health was sparked by her own experience of a life-threatening postpartum haemorrhage after the birth of her daughter, Grace, in 2003. ‘It was such a part of my destiny to have that realisation

that... if you're not in the right place at the right time, or you don't have access to safe and respectful maternity care, the difference between life and death is very visceral.'

EMC operates under the guiding principle that maternal health is not just a women's rights issue but also a human rights issue. The organisation focuses on three pillars: education, community engagement and advocacy.

Christy states on the website: 'Every mother has a story. It's our job at Every Mother Counts to make sure these stories are documented and shared widely so that others will learn from them, and one day these tragedies will be stories of the past.'

Through grants and partnerships, EMC supports a variety of initiatives, including providing transportation for pregnant women in rural areas, training midwives and offering comprehensive prenatal care.

Christy has also directed a documentary, *No Woman, No Cry*, that further highlights these issues. The film, which premiered in 2010, followed the stories of at-risk pregnant women in four countries: Bangladesh, Tanzania, Guatemala and the United States. It has been instrumental in raising awareness and funds for EMC.

To date, EMC has supported more than 1.5 million women, families and healthcare workers. It has invested more



Christy was a guest at The Kering Foundation's Caring for Women dinner in New York in 2022.



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Christy walks
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than \$42 million to support awareness-raising, community-led solutions and advocacy for systems change.

‘When I look back to what the world was like in 2010, nobody was talking about maternal mortality,’ Christy says. ‘The US maternal health crisis, especially the black maternal health crisis... Those words were not being uttered when we started this work. It feels good to play such a large role in getting attention around this issue.’

Long before she was a passionate advocate for maternal health, Christy was a household name. In the '90s, she stood alongside legends such as Naomi Campbell, Cindy Crawford, Linda Evangelista and Claudia Schiffer, creating a new archetype for models.

She was born in 1969 in Walnut Creek, California, and her striking beauty and poise caught the fashion world's attention early on. ‘Discovered’ while horse-riding in Miami at 13, she moved to New York to begin modelling full time at the age of 18.

‘I started working so young,’ she says. ‘My “order” in my family definitely changed because of what I was earning. I became an equal to my father very early, which I loved, and that was always my goal. Of course, men and women are equal; [but] growing up I thought my father had so much more autonomy and power. I wanted those qualities and characteristics.’

Her collaborations with renowned photographers Steven Meisel and Bruce Weber, as well as her status as the face of Calvin Klein's Eternity fragrance campaign, cemented her place in fashion history.

‘Before I started my career, my goal was to be economically independent or financially independent; to not have to

Christy modelled for dozens of top designers, including Michael Kors, at the height of her fame in the '90s.



answer to anybody and to really be able to make up my own mind and do what I wanted.’

Christy's down-to-earth nature contrasts with the often-superficial fashion industry. This groundedness is inherited in part from her mother, Elizabeth, who began accompanying the 14-year-old on modelling gigs. It's also the quality that has shielded her from some of the industry's darker elements. ‘Being a person who is quiet and studies people, I think I learnt how not to stand out. My mom never said, like, “Oh, here's how you're going to protect yourself.” I think I just really paid attention, honestly.’

‘I don't want to put myself out as the face of ageing beauty.’

In the '90s, she was everywhere: magazine covers, runway shows and advertising campaigns. This era of supermodels had a distinct cultural impact, and Christy was at the forefront. ‘The shows always felt a little like chaos,’ she recalls. ‘I think we, as models, will hold some of that



energy and that tension, and it's not peaceful in a lot of those spaces.'

In the past decade, Christy has walked only three shows. 'I'm a shy person, actually. I like a quiet set. If I hear any techno music, I want to flee.' She's thankful that she is still able to model, despite often finding the industry's demands 'too much'. 'I can do a day here and there,' she says. 'But then, two days, I'm like, "Too much. It's too much."'

'It's still my livelihood. I don't take a salary here [at Every Mother Counts] because that doesn't feel right, but this is my main job.'

At 55, Christy still draws plenty of attention, especially on social media. But she remains unfazed by online opinions, having turned off her comments on her daughter's advice. 'I can't say that I'm Teflon. I'm sure if I did read something that was pointed or mean, it would hurt me. But I also try not to give that much attention to any of it.' In an industry famously bitchy to older women, she's clear about not wanting to be a poster child for those over the age of 50. 'I don't want to put myself out as the face of ageing beauty,' she says.



Above: Models Linda Evangelista, Brandi Quinones, Naja Auermann, Christy and Claudia Schiffer pose for a photograph at a Valentino fashion show in 1994.

Top left: Naja Auermann, Claudia Schiffer and Christy with the late Karl Lagerfeld in 1992.

Top right: Christy and Edward Burns have been married for 21 years.

As a devoted mother to her daughter Grace and son Finn, Christy's family life is central to her. Balancing motherhood with her regular advocacy work and occasional modelling gigs requires

juggling. 'Like most working moms, I am conflicted at times. Many moms I meet in my travels are working moms – most of them doing it alone and without any support or partnering of any kind.'



Above: Christy and Edward with their daughter Grace and son Finn.
Right: Grace and Christy at a Fendi event in New York.

Christy met her husband, actor and filmmaker Edward Burns, at a party in 2000. The couple got married in 2003, and have since built a life together filled with love, mutual respect and shared values. 'He has never failed to step up when needed, and is happy to fall back when I return to the helm.'

But, with the demands of her kids and her cause, does Christy still have a place in her heart for clothes? 'Actually, I wasn't that into fashion, ever. But I understand that it can be a big form of expression for people.'

Claudia Schiffer famously has an aircraft hangar full of clothes. While Christy admits that she does keep a few things from those extraordinary fashion shoots in storage, she is mostly a very modest shopper. 'I appreciate the beautiful things I got to wear, but it's hard to justify the expense. The economy is crashing and clothes are getting more expensive. Some fashion is art – but I'm not buying huge pieces of art either.'

When the occasion calls for it, she'll definitely step up and sparkle – much to her daughter's delight. 'Now, if I put on lipstick, she goes, "Ooh!"'



So I guess I still appreciate the power of fashion through her eyes.'

Christy's advocacy work has earned her numerous accolades, including being named one of *Time* magazine's 100 Most Influential People in the World. Despite her many accomplishments, her humility and authenticity shine through in all her interactions, whether she's speaking at a global summit or chatting with mothers at a rural clinic.

Looking ahead, Christy is excited by the new possibilities life brings. 'I'll be 60 in five years, and I want to start thinking through what the next five years will be for me personally.'

She feels optimistic and determined. 'There's still so much to be done, but I'm hopeful.' Her vision for EMC continues to evolve, with plans to expand its reach and have an impact on even more mothers. 'We're just getting started.' ♦