

Crime Time

New student Wendy Kaufman, who savored her sip of fame as the Snapple Lady, gets a taste of criminal justice

For today's lesson in the psychological foundations of police work, Prof. Robert Panzarella is lecturing on the topic of serial killers to a class at Manhattan's John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Only at the moment, he's stuck trying to remember a name: a notorious Atlanta murderer. A hand shoots up. "Wayne Williams," says a stocky brunette a good 20 years older than her classmates. "It's all fascinating,

the deviant mind, the criminal mind," she says later. "I could tell all the students were like, 'Who's this lady who knows serial killers?'"

They'd have recognized her if she'd had a bottle of Snapple in that hand. Wendy Kaufman, 43, known to millions as the bustling, friendly Snapple Lady in 37 commercials that ran from 1993 to 1997, began taking the course in January in preparation for a master's program in crimi-



Being in the ads "was the most exciting time of my life," says Kaufman (in a 1994 spot).

nal justice. "It'd be wonderful to be a homicide detective," she says. "But then, I might walk into a room, see a corpse and just throw up."

Probably not, having already fortified herself with—and found inspi-



"Everything I do is in abundance," says Pez collector Kaufman (with a special "Wendy" dispenser her boyfriend had made for her).

● where are they now?

ration in—a steady diet of programs like the Learning Channel's *Medical Detectives*. "She loves the forensic shows," says her mother, Myrna Kaufman, 63, a homemaker and mother of three. "I don't know what the thrill is, but she likes it. And anything Wendy shows a great interest in, she'll do well at."

She certainly put Snapple on the map. A consumer-relations specialist in the company's Valley Stream, N.Y., headquarters, Kaufman became one of the unlikelier immortals of advertising, playing herself as she cheerfully responded to goofy testimonials about the company's iced teas and fruit drinks. The ads transformed Snapple, founded in 1972, into a national brand—and Kaufman into a star. "I couldn't go

anywhere without people being all over me," she says. "I felt like Madonna."

As showbiz careers go, the parallels end there. Kaufman grew up in North Woodmere, N.Y., among what she calls "country-club people." Her father, Ronald Kaufman, 67, owned a steel-manufacturing company. After studying film and sociology at Syracuse University from 1976 to 1980, she spent 10 years working in shipping and billing for the family business, then moved to Snapple, where she helped customers having trouble finding the beverages. "I spent those years the happiest I'd ever been," she says now. "I made a difference in some people's lives."

In 1992, when Snapple decided to do an offbeat ad campaign spotlight-

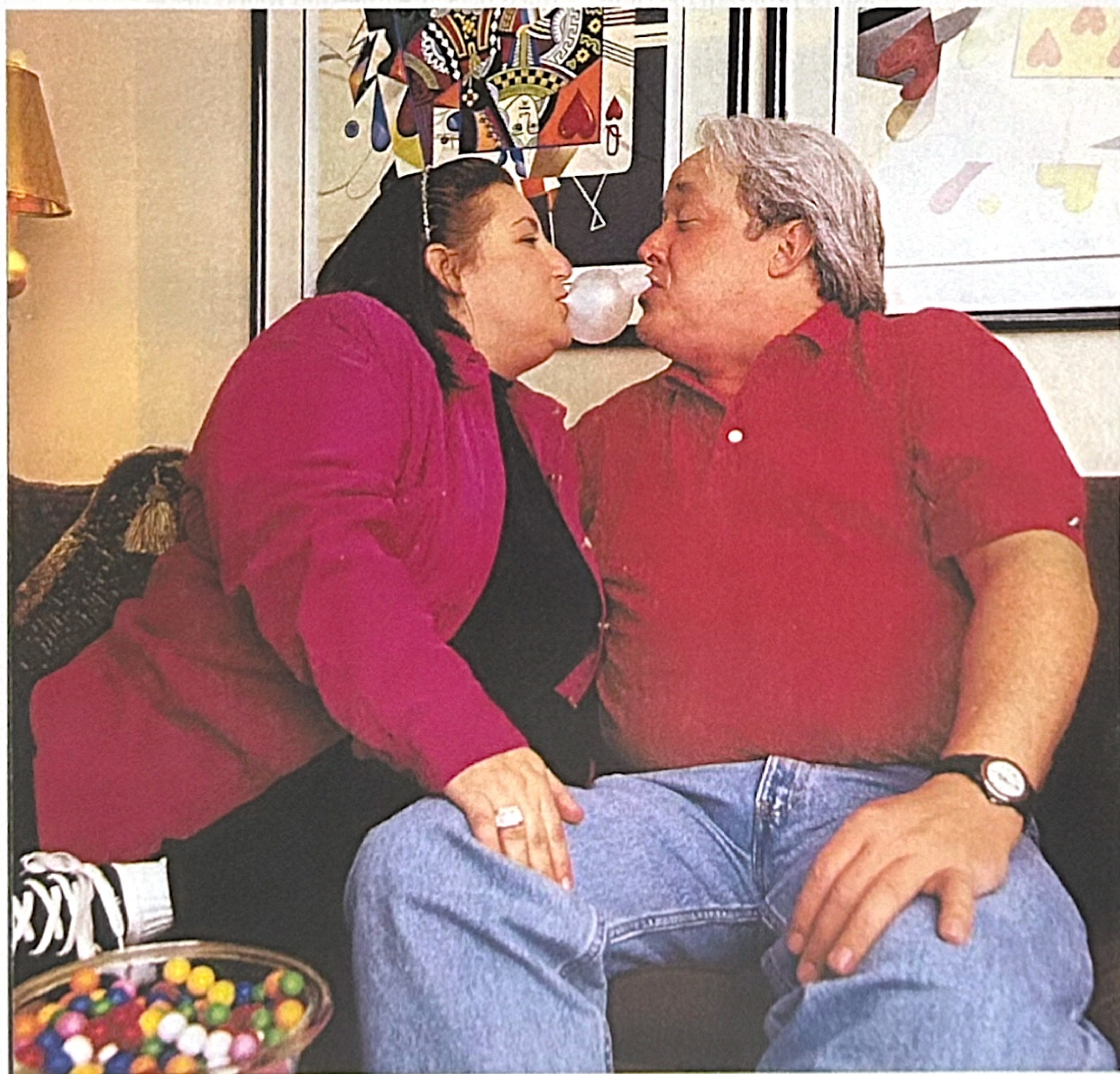
ing an employee, the bouncy lady in consumer relations sprang to mind. "She's amazingly affable," says Jude Hammerle, a marketing consultant who was her boss at the time. The 5'2" Kaufman, well aware that she wasn't "your prototype spokesmodel," accepted as a lark. Within months she was receiving hundreds of letters. "People with weight problems were the first to write. I think viewers were fed up with perfection. Who needs perfect? It's obnoxious."

But in 1996, Quaker Oats, which had bought the company for an astronomical \$1.7 billion in 1994, wanted a new image and iced the campaign. "It was on every news channel. It was awful," says Kaufman. "I checked myself right into therapy. I worked hard on learning how to keep the personal from the professional."

Paid annually in the low six figures for the ads, she saved enough money to dabble in acting, writing and stand-up comedy while still living comfortably in her two-bedroom Manhattan apartment. She now shares it with her boyfriend of three years, Steven Harkins, 44, a TV ad-sales executive and friend from college. Harkins shares Kaufman's passion for Pez dispensers—she has more than a thousand in her collection—if not her taste for crime. "I call her Ms. Marple," says Harkins. "I can picture her as a bubbly little Jewish lady saying, 'Ahhhh, so you killed your wife?'"

But Kaufman, who still does promotional appearances for the beverage's current owner, Cadbury Schweppes, knows homicide cases will never replace Snapple cases in her heart. "I have no children," she says, "but I have millions of bottles that are my babies."

- Tom Glatto
- Amy Bonawitz in New York City



"Wendy's heart is bigger than a building," says boyfriend Steven Harkins (at home in New York City).