

BY SUSAN LANIER-GRAHAM

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WARDROBE: VINTAGE HERVE LEGER AT

FASHION BY ROBERT BLACK



Lights, camera, smile! Sheree

Hartwell is a tall, confident businesswoman, comfortable in who she is and what she wants. She is more comfortable than most during an interview. Those are necessary qualities as owner of Scottsdale's FORD/Robert Black Agency (FORD/RBA). This world-renowned talent agency has extended thousands of contracts to talent for appearances around the world during its 25 years—and Hartwell sees an even brighter future ahead.

Sheree

Hartwell

The young model

When 6-year-old Sheree Kirkeby (her maiden name) moved from South Dakota to Scottsdale with her mom in the late '80s, she soon found a passion in dance and talent competitions. "I think a lot of people thought my mom pushed me into the competitions," says Hartwell, "but I enjoyed them. Besides, when you're 12-years-old and 5'10", it's a great thing to do."

One of those talent competitions proved to be a life-changing event when a representative from FORD/RBA served as a competition judge when Hartwell was 12. "He asked me to come in and after talking to us, they signed me. Of course, at 12, there's not a lot of work as a model. Like most 12-year-old girls, I had braces," recalls Hartwell, "but by the time I was a teenager, I had steady work."

Hartwell always remembers her first job. It was a shoot for the back-to-school edition of the popular Spiegel catalog. "The reality of modeling hit me hard," she laughs. "It was July or August in Scottsdale, 118 degrees, and they had me in a down coat." Despite that, she wasn't deterred. In fact, throughout her teen years, Hartwell modeled for the agency, traveling to New York and throughout Europe, as well as garnering cover shoots in Milan.

Off to college

Despite her modeling success, Hartwell always knew her future wasn't in modeling. When she joined the agency at 12, Robert Black asked what she wanted to do when she grew up. Hartwell told him she wanted to own a modeling agency. To pursue that dream, she left for college and a degree in fashion merchandising and advertising from Northern Arizona University. "No one could understand why I wanted to go to NAU," she says. "It's not exactly a fashion capital, but it was the only state university with a fashion program."

Hartwell modeled throughout her early years in college, and ended up having her favorite job during that time. She modeled for an anti-smoking campaign, but it was a "pretty" ad, with Hartwell

smelling daisies. The ad became a billboard that went up throughout the Southwest. "Everyone at school gave me a hard time about it," she laughs. "My mom and I drove all over taking photos of these billboards. It was a fun shoot and fun to see the billboards."

Yet, all throughout college, she kept alive the dream of owning an agency. "I knew I didn't want to be a buyer," she explains. "Even my school projects involved scouting for talent." When she needed an internship the summer before graduation, it was natural to turn to Black. She gladly exchanged a summer of modeling for a summer interning at the Scottsdale agency.

After college—and about 50 resumes typed and sent out via the post office the "old-fashioned" way—Hartwell landed a job with City Model Management in San Francisco. "Here I was, 22-years-old, the director of the women's division," she recalls, "and I really didn't know what I was doing."

Hartwell refers to those five years in San Francisco as her "MBA in the business." She says it was an incredible time. "It was the height of the dot-com boom, things were thriving and there was no penny-pinching."

Returning home

But home beckoned. Hartwell needed a change, but didn't really plan to buy FORD/RBA. She was visiting her mother in June, eight years ago, and arranged to have breakfast with Black, her mentor. Over breakfast, she asked Black if he would consider selling her his business. He answered yes without hesitation. Two months later, Hartwell returned to Scottsdale and officially bought the agency the next March. "Here I was, again—this time I'm 27-years-old, and I'd never even looked at a Profit and Loss Statement," she laughs.

As the agency's new owner, Hartwell vowed to continue its long history as a full-service modeling agency that represents quality talent. The partnership between

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FORD Models

Inc. and Robert Black

Agency, created in 1994, is the only one of its kind. This gives the local agency the ability to feed talent to markets in Los Angeles, New York and Chicago.

"I also want to continue nurturing our talent," says Hartwell. "This business is cutthroat, but I'm not that kind of person. I want to be approachable. I like to think we are educating people about the business. Not that we are a school; we don't do classes. However, I spend hours and hours on the phone with moms. A huge part of the job becomes counseling-based. It is good that I can offer our talent both sides of the business because of my background."

Something must be working. Not only is the agency growing, but the talent at FORD/RBA tends to stay for the long-term. "We have clients who have been with the agency for 10, 15, even 20 years," says Hartwell.

The obvious questions, though, are: Why Scottsdale? Is there work for models out of Arizona?

"This is a great way to break into the market," explains Hartwell. "The work here is less intense. The talent has a chance to ease into the industry. While it is easy in New York to be sucked into the lifestyle, Scottsdale gives people—especially the young kids—a chance to get some modeling under their belts first."

Hartwell explains that she can get younger models working locally, then

send the 16- to 17-year-old girls to Europe or Hong Kong for real exposure. "Here in the U.S., we are celebrity-obsessed," she says. "Magazine covers tend to be well known faces. In other places, magazine covers still use models. These young girls can get cover shots and come home with tear sheets."

The assignments in glamorous places are not all fun and games, however. "I always explain that the first two weeks in Tokyo or Milan or wherever, you're going to cry, feel miserable and homesick, wonder why Sheree sent me here," she says. "I try to tell them to work hard, but use their time off to visit museums, see the sites, explore, get out and see the world. What other 16-year-old has that chance?"

Scottsdale talent

Scottsdale has some great homegrown talent, in addition to Hartwell herself. The local market utilizes an enormous amount of talent in the 25- to 45-age range, but there are successes in all ranges. "There really aren't many overnight successes in this business," explains Hartwell, "but Jeanne Johnston is the exception."

The 17-year-old was hanging out at Scottsdale Fashion Square three years ago when a FORD/RBA agent spotted her and invited her to the office. Within weeks, she walked at Bryant Park for New York Fashion Week and began traveling overseas. Six months later, she landed the cover photo for *Harper's Bazaar*. Since then, she has appeared on eight more national and interna-

tional covers, walked the runways for major designers, and lived in Tokyo.

The agency also has clients with long-term careers here in the Valley, such as Gina Salazar-Hook. After 15 years with the agency, Salazar-Hook has been in print campaigns, television ads, and is the spokesperson for Sands Chevrolet, Nationwide Vision and The Video Professor.

For others, FORD/RBA has been the catalyst that started other careers: Garrett Hedlund (*Tron Legacy*, *Country Strong*), Kellan Lutz (*Twilight*, *Immortals*), Max Adler (*Glee*) and Felisha Terrell (*Social Network*, *Get Smart*). During the summer 2012 season, FORD/RBA had models working in London, Barcelona, Paris, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Taipei, Australia, New Zealand, New York, and across the U.S.

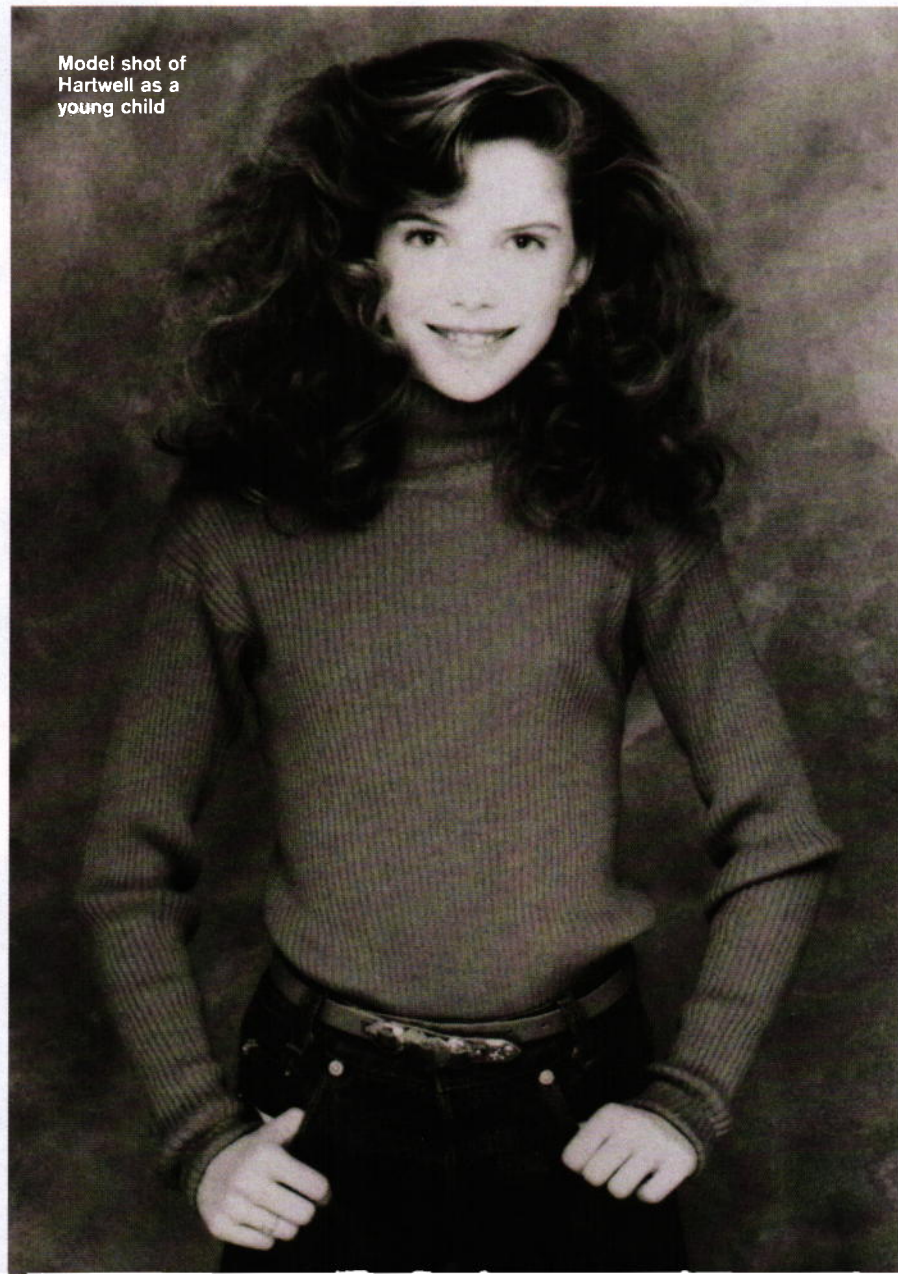
Looking ahead

Hartwell and her husband of six years, Beau (who happens to serve as the agency's CFO) have an 8-month-old little girl. "It gives me a new perspective," she says with the wide smile of a proud mom. "I was worried about juggling family and career, but it works. I learned from my mom. She was the best." Hartwell says it gives her a renewed sense of what is important in life.

As for the agency's future, Hartwell hopes to see it grow, as people realize this is an ideal scouting location for the next fresh face. "I want to continue to represent our talent really well and to represent models and actors from 5 to 95 for everything from high fashion to extremely commercial.

"There are a lot of people out there wanting to be famous," says Hartwell. "They tell me they want to walk for the top designers and be on the cover of *Vogue*. Well, so would I, but not everyone can be. However, you can make a great living as a model. You might have to wear a uniform for [a major pet store] and hold a puppy sometimes, but it gets you out there." She smiles her winning smile. "I try to keep it extremely real."

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Model shot of Hartwell as a young child