

# Barbara Eden's 'Dream' Journey

HOLLYWOOD ICON IS  
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PRESS CLUB'S LEGEND AWARD  
BY ALEX BEN BLOCK

**N**o one was more surprised than Barbara Eden when she was offered the title role in "I Dream of Jeannie." That part launched a career that is being celebrated tonight, when she receives the Los Angeles Press Club's Legend Award for Lifetime Achievement and Contributions to Society, at the National Arts & Entertainment Journalism Awards.

It was 1964, and Eden had read in a trade paper that producer Sidney Sheldon was testing tall, dark-haired beauty queens to play the 2,000-year-old djinn.

"I thought, well, that's not for me," said Eden with a giggle. "I'm the short blonde who is kind of funny."

Her agent sent over a script, and asked what she thought.

"I said, 'I think it's great,'" she recalled. "He said, 'That's good, because they want you to do it. They've made an offer.' And I said, 'Well, hold it. Do they know what I look like?' I just couldn't believe it."

After toiling in obscurity in movies and TV, Eden was thrilled. She did the fantasy-comedy pilot for NBC.

Then something happened, and Eden knew she had to turn down the role.

"Coincidentally, the very day the show sold was when my doctor said, 'You're going to have a baby.'"

She and her husband Mike Ansara had been married for seven years and really wanted a child. So Eden called Sheldon and asked to meet. He was at a dinner party at comic-writer Buck Henry's home, but invited her over. They went to the library and Eden delivered the news, saying, "I can't do your show."

"Of course, he was taken aback," Eden recalled. "Then he said, 'Well, let me find out what we can do about this.' And thank God that he worked very, very hard getting those first 13 shows done. I looked like a walking tent but it all worked out."

Eden starred for five seasons (139 episodes) as the genie that astronaut Anthony Nelson finds,



Above: Dressed for her iconic role as the genie in "I Dream of Jeannie."

Far left and left: Eden ran and won the Miss San Francisco beauty pageant; Eden's first film role was in *A Private's Affair*, 1959.

Barbara Eden joined Bob Hope on his trip to entertain troops in the Persian Gulf; Eden co-starred with Larry Hagman in "I Dream of Jeannie."



giving her a role that changed her life and career. The series continues to run in syndication and on cable worldwide.

"When you think of the early days of television, Barbara Eden's 'Jeannie' is one of the first characters that comes to mind," said Press Club President Lisa Richwine. "Eden brought joy to generations of TV viewers, making her a true Hollywood legend who is still making an impact today."

She was born Barbara Jean Morehead on Aug. 23, 1931, in Tucson, Arizona, and was raised in San Francisco. Her parents divorced when she was young, and she struggled with a lazy eye.

Her mother, Alice Mary Franklin, began singing with her as a child and remained a strong influence until her passing in 1986.

It was an acting teacher who suggested she enter a beauty pageant. She did and became Miss San Francisco.

She moved to Los Angeles to pursue her career. Her agent suggested she change her name. She became Barbara Eden.

Eden has earned a reputation for working hard and knowing her lines. As "Jeannie," her biggest challenge was working with co-star Larry Hagman. He constantly complained about show scripts and was disruptive, at times urinating and



Clockwise, from above left: Eden starred in *Flaming Star* opposite Elvis Presley; Family photo with sister Allison's family, son Matthew and mother, Alice Mary Franklin, on right; early photos of Eden growing up, the baby photo taken when she was about 2 years old; son, Matthew, joined her when she received her Hollywood Walk of Fame star.

throwing up on the set, even occasionally refusing to talk to Eden. Sheldon sent him to see a therapist, who in '60s style told Hagman to smoke pot and drink champagne at work to calm his nerves.

"Larry was his own worst enemy," said Eden, "but when the camera rolled, we just clicked."

After "Jeannie," Eden appeared in movies, and on TV with Hagman, even when he was the star of "Dallas."

Over 70 years, Eden has starred in more than 25 films, 19 TV movies, and has performed in Las Vegas and around the world. She has charmed co-stars including Elvis Presley, Bob Hope, Carol Burnett, George Burns, Jerry Lewis, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, Tony Orlando, Elton John and Charley Pride.

Eden prides herself on long-lasting relationships. She has been with manager Gene Schwam for 56 years.

"She has always carried her head above the crowd," said Schwam, "and was never a diva. Through all of the success she has enjoyed, she was always kind and thoughtful."

Over the decades Eden has found great joy, and navigated devastating tragedies, with her family.

She married Ansara in 1958 when he was starting on a series. They had one child, Matthew, born that first season of "Jeannie." He later suffered from drug and alcohol problems.

Eden got pregnant again in 1971, when her career was soaring. Ansara's career had slowed, making her the main money earner in the family. As a result she agreed to a 10-week stage show tour during her pregnancy. She was heartbroken in the seventh month when she learned her baby was stillborn.

Eden had an emotional breakdown and her

marriage to Ansara collapsed. They divorced in 1974.

Eden married Chicago marketing executive Charles Fegert in 1977. She soon found it wasn't a good fit, and they divorced in 1982.

Eden married again, in 1991, to architect Jon Eicholtz. They remain together today.

Eden's son Matthew tried to follow his parents into acting. He had a small role with his mother in the 1989 movie *Your Mother Wears Combat Boots*, but Matthew went into drug rehab a number of times. He got into body building, but in 2001 relapsed and died of a heroin overdose at the age of 35. Eden's heart was broken once again.

Eden wound down her singing and dancing performances in her '80s, but still performs a stage show where she takes questions from the audience.

Early this year, Eden donated the original jar that Jeannie arrived in, and her costume, to the Smithsonian Institution, which has enshrined the series into the annals of history.

"So many people are stuck in jobs that they have to feed their family and they can't find another job," said Eden. "They're unhappy, but do it. I'm lucky. I found what I like to do, and I'm able to work in it."



## BARBARA EDEN

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