

"I love pieces where everything is shimmering and shaking and sparkling," says Courtney (with some of her finery at her L.A. shop).



## Hidden Talent

On the run from the FBI, Erica Courtney started making jewelry. Now she bedazzles the stars

One look at Erica Courtney's opulent, gem-laden creations adorning stars like Julia Roberts and Madonna and you know this is a woman who lives for glamor. How could she not? Her mother, a housewife, once roasted a Christmas goose in edible silver paper imported from India. Her stepfather gave her and sister Cezanne (Dad was an artist) a \$100 weekly allowance. And when a neighbor in her hometown of Lafayette, La., gave 9-year-old Erica some Austrian crystal jewelry, she made a necklace for her cat. "It was incredibly glamorous,"

says Courtney, 46. "I just loved it."

No word on how the cat felt, but Courtney's current clients share her youthful enthusiasm. "Erica's jewelry makes you feel unique and romantic—it's like something from another time," says Portia de Rossi, who chose a \$120,000 diamond-cross necklace for last year's Golden Globes. (Other items cost up to \$200,000.)

Yet in between her gilded upbringing and her success as the head of a Los Angeles-based jewelry company that earned, she estimates, \$22 million last

### A girl's best friends

The bigger the earrings, says Courtney, "the more glamorous." Whoopi Goldberg wore this \$24,000 pair at the 2002 Oscars. The pearl (\$15,600) and 2.5 carat diamond (\$30,000) rings are from Courtney's new spring line.





"It's like an extension of yourself," says Vanessa Williams of Courtney's jewelry. Sandra Bullock (left, in '01), Kristin Davis (in '02) and Jennie Garth (in '02) are fans too.

year, Courtney's life took a decidedly undazzling detour. For nearly a decade she was wanted not by glitz-seeking stars but by the FBI. Her crime? Kidnapping her son Joshua, then 4, because she feared her ex-husband was about to win full custody. Between 1983 and 1992, Courtney—born Tasha Ingram—lived on the lam, adopting an alias inspired by *All My Children*'s Erica Kane and using her wiles to open bank accounts without a social security number. "When you live like this," she says, "you learn to charm the birds from the trees."

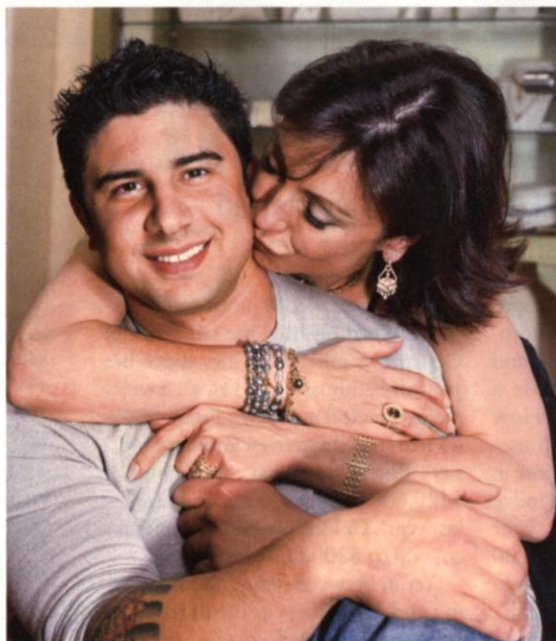
At the time it seemed her only skill. An unambitious student, Courtney had dropped out of Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge when she was 19 and at 20 wed Ron Cappel, then 21, a dry-cleaning deliveryman. "We were from different sides of the tracks," she says. "But he was cute, sweet and funny." The thrill faded fast. "It was difficult to be broke and clip coupons," Courtney says. The pair fought, and Cappel, she says, sometimes slapped or kicked her. (Cappel, now a cabinetmaker in Baton Rouge, says they both got physical—"We had big-time tempers"—which Courtney doesn't dispute.) Their son, born a year after their 1977 wedding, "would hold me while his daddy screamed at me," she says.

The couple divorced in 1982, but the custody battle dragged into 1983, by which time both had remarried—Courtney to furrier

Michael Fonseca (who died in 2002). Because Cappel's father knew a judge in town, Courtney worried she might lose her son in court. "My father put the fear of God in her," says Cappel. "No decision was made, but Tasha got antsy and kidnapped the kid."

On Labor Day weekend she packed clothes and two teddy bears, left her new husband without a word and headed for upstate New York and then Mexico Beach, Fla., living on monthly \$1,000 checks from her mother. Marvels Josh, 24, who now works for her: "She gave up her freedom for me."

As a fugitive, Courtney discovered her entrepreneurial instincts. In Dallas she began decorating sunglasses with rhinestones and selling them to local



"I never regretted the day my mom left with me," says Josh (with Courtney at her home). "I loved being with her."

## style

shops. "People went crazy for them," she says. In two years she graduated to working with diamonds—and pulling in \$500,000 a year. (Josh helped out, and in 1991 his designs ended up on *Beverly Hills, 90210*.) She was happily dating a musician, Vincent Flores (whom she would later marry and divorce). But in February 1992, while she was in Manhattan for a jewelry show, armed FBI agents pounded on her hotel room door. "It felt like the whole place was closing in on me," she remembers. By morning she was Tasha Ingram again, back in Louisiana.

Sentenced to two years' probation, she saw Josh returned to his father, who now had four more kids. "I wanted to die," she says. Josh suffered too. "It was like living with strangers," he says. "I made myself such a menace that after 2½ years my dad told me I could go home."

Today home for mother and son is Los Angeles, where Josh will marry Jamie Lee Kalish, a TV publicist, in August. Slowly he and Courtney are mending their relationship with Cappel, whom she saw over Thanksgiving. "I met Josh's future wife," says Cappel. "She's going to be a very sweet daughter-in-law."

About the kidnapping, Courtney now says, "I felt badly—every kid suffers from not having a father. But I felt I had no choice."

With the past behind her, Courtney, now dating a former racecar driver, dreams of a shining future. "I'd like to create jewelry that is treasured and remembered," she says, "like Cartier and Van Cleef." Who knows? It might be a family affair. "Joshie designed his fiancée's engagement ring," she says proudly. "If I do say so, it's got his momma's touch."

- Allison Adato
  - Alison Singh Gee
- in Los Angeles