



TELEVISION

LELA LOREN

THE POWER OF ART & GRACE



Lela Loren has come a long way from having dreams of being a biologist. LELA LOREN

Star of the hit 'Power' draws strength from her heritage

Ana Pelayo Connery Special to USA TODAY

Some little girls grow up dreaming of stardom, of hitting it big, Hollywood style. Not Lela Loren, the star of TV's "Power," the hit Starz drama produced by rapper Curtis "50 Cent" Jackson. From the age of 4, Loren spent her childhood in Sacramento, California, plotting a career as a biologist. ■ "I wanted to be the next Jane Goodall," says Loren, 38. "I had, like, four cats, dogs, a scrub jay I rescued, a snake, frogs, mice – inevitably something would get loose." ■ Her love of biology never wavered until she stumbled upon acting in college. "I signed up for a fine arts class to get it out of the way," Loren recalls. Two weeks later, she learned the class was full and she'd been automatically placed into a beginner's acting class. "I begrudgingly fell in love with it. Instead of feeling great about it, I had this awful, sinking feeling I was going to mess up my whole life! Everyone knows that actors end up waiting tables."

Her parents also were confused. "My dad's family is academic and science-oriented, but this was where my mother's fortitude came in," says Loren. "I decided I would rather be a waitress my whole life and go after what I've really fell in love with than pretend I don't love this and take the safe bet."

It took three years for Loren to land her first audition, and she paid her dues with small roles on shows such as "The Shield," "CSI" and "Gang Related." "You work once, maybe twice or three times a year, you eke it out and hope it's building to something more."

The actress credits her mother for her perseverance and tenacity. Born into poverty in Mexico's Tierra Caliente, a region known as a hub for drug traffick-

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ing, her mother's future looked bleak from an early age. "Because of extreme poverty, she was given away to servitude at age 6, but the upside is that she got to go to school," Loren says.

Her mother eventually immigrated to the United States in the 1970s, married Loren's father, an economist from upstate New York, and raised two children. "Her dream was to learn English so she could go back and give tours at the anthropology museum in Mexico, but she played the long game," Loren says, with obvious pride.

After graduating valedictorian from an adult high school, Loren's mother went on to earn her college degree in her 40s, and became a teacher. Over the years, she made a point to keep up with relatives back in Mexico. "It was important for her to reconnect with her family, so we would go back to her village every year for three months during the summer, and I still go almost every year."

Those hot Mexico summers were a stark contrast to Loren's life in suburban Sacramento, where at the time there wasn't much of a Latino community. "For nine months of the year I lived a very American upbringing, then for three months I had no running water or electricity, and we slept in adobe huts with dirt floors — but I loved it. I feel like I got a huge gift with the worlds of my parents. I got to experience both cultures."

Loren credits those trips to Mexico for a slew of life lessons that buoyed her once she pursued acting. "I learned not to be afraid of poverty and not to romanticize it," she says. "My family deals with problems on a daily basis that wipe out any problems I could have as an actress."

It took 10 years for "Power" and the



"I think what makes Angela an exciting character is how different she is from me," Lela Loren says of her role on Starz' "Power." GOTHAM/GC IMAGES

role of Angela Valdes to come along and during much of that time Loren did, in fact, work as a waitress to make ends meet. "I know how to live small, on rice and beans. I never approached it thinking I would have arrived at where I am."

Today, she's enjoying the success of spending five seasons as whip-smart Valdes, a federal prosecutor hopelessly in love with the drug lord she's sup-

posed to be investigating. The onscreen chemistry with her co-star Omari Hardwick is palpable, leaving fans buzzing on social media. "I think what makes Angela an exciting character is how different she is from me. She's a Nuyorican city girl, and I'm a country girl from granaola-crunching California. On "Power," she has to navigate very different worlds, and I grew up like that, too, but

Angela's winning by any means necessary would not fly in my house."

Once again, she points to her mother for instilling good values: "My mother raised me not to care how rich someone is, how many houses they own. It's all about how decent you are as a person and how generous your heart is. Your character is your character regardless of your circumstance."