

Confessions of a 'View'-ish girl

'Millionaire' isn't only thing Meredith brought back to life

By MICHAEL GILTZ

MEREDITH Vieira turns 50 tomorrow. But who's counting? "I never lied about my age; I never cared," says Vieira, co-host of "The View" and host of the syndicated "Who Wants To

Be A Millionaire. "Now I'm feeling in a kind of weird mood and I'm wondering if maybe I'm a little depressed and I don't even realize it."

"I've been so busy saying, 'It's so great and I'm so blessed and lucky,' that now I'm beginning to say, 'Why? What's so great about it?'"

Well, a lot of things. Vieira's recent contract re-negotiations with "The View" has made her a relatively rich woman.

"The View" is recent search for a new co-host to join Vieira, Barbara Walters, Star Jones, and Joy Behar gave the talk show a boost in ratings.

And the daily version of "Millionaire" has jumped 30 percent in ratings during its second year — and seems likely to become the biggest game-show hit since "Wheel of Fortune" and "Jeopardy."

The biggest change in her life may be sitting next to "Survivor" contestant Elisabeth Hasselbeck on "The View." Vieira says adding a conservative voice to the show was a big factor in Hasselbeck winning the plum slot.

"They did not want us to be seen as these liberal clucking hens as we're coming into the political season," says Vieira, who disagrees that the hosts can all be labeled as liberal (Star Jones is a social conservative and Vieira considers herself an independent).

"Ultimately, it was chemistry" that won Hasselbeck the job, says Meredith. "That was the most important thing."

But "if we'd had the best chemistry with someone

who was a screaming liberal, probably they wouldn't have gotten the job."

Vieira's role on "The View" is to speak her mind and bring to bear that journalism background. (She began in the highly competitive New York market at Ch. 2, then went on to "60 Minutes.")

Sticking with "The View" was certainly safer than accepting CBS' offer last year to jump-start

"They did not want us to be seen as these liberal clucking hens as we're coming into the political season."

their perennial third-place morning show.

But agreeing to host "Millionaire" was widely seen as a dead-end choice because the primetime edition had worn out its welcome so quickly with constant airings. If everyone was sick of seeing it in primetime, why would they want to watch it five days a week?

"A lot of people said to me when I was considering it, 'What are you doing? That show's dead,'" admits Vieira. "But I always really liked the show, and watched it from the very beginning with my kids. Like 'Jeopardy' and 'Wheel of Fortune,' it's a great game."

It's the latest triumph for a woman who achieved the pinnacle of success for a TV reporter by landing on "60 Minutes." But Vieira's dream

job turned into a nightmare when having a baby (she now has three) conflicted with the heavy demands of work. She soon realized that almost no women in TV have more than one or two kids.

"I did look around at ['60 Minutes'] and there was one other person with children. It just wasn't done."

"I was a basket case for the last year. And I was only there two years. I'd be crying when I had to go away on a story. I'd be crying when I was home. I was always crying."

After maternity leave, Vieira struggled to find a new role at CBS.

"They assigned me to the early morning news. It was what they thought a mom would want. I remember feeling this condescension about what moms would want. I could throw up at four a.m. instead of seven."

She ultimately switched to ABC, where that network approached her about increasing her workload and Vieira was back where she started — fighting for a home life while maintaining her career.

"There was essentially nothing for me, they said. Nothing in news. I was negotiating a way out when the call came asking if I wanted to audition for this show 'The View.'"

Now she can laugh about all her success on "The View" and about turning the disses "Millionaire" into ratings gold — and still getting home in time to do what moms do.

"I have a new dog that poops all over the house," Vieira says. "If I don't get home, there will just be more to clean up."



Meredith Vieira thought she was pretty much washed-up after leaving "60 Minutes" (right).

'I really want them to win'

ON "Who Wants to Be A Millionaire," Meredith Vieira's role isn't quite like the cheerleader. Regis Philbin was in primetime, and it certainly isn't the adversarial role of the original British host.

"My role is to relax

[contestants] enough so they can do the best they can do," she said. "In some sense, all those years as a reporter have paid off in an odd way on a show like this, because it is about getting into someone else's head and making them feel comfortable and

helping them put their best foot forward."

"I do try to fool around with them when I can throw in a bluff and be deadpan and have a poker face on. But from a nice place. If that's possible," she said. "I really want them to win." — Michael Giltz