

# Niki Taylor

## *Greener Pastures*

BY ELIZABETH RAHE • PHOTOGRAPHER JILL WACHTER

STYLE DIRECTOR ELYSE RANART





## Home-grown supermodel Niki Taylor heads down a different road.

**H**ey, lightning is really dangerous here," Niki Taylor cautions, cringing against thunder pounding closer with each camera click. At 5-feet-11½, she is certainly the highest point in this one-time horse pasture, just over the hill from her country-manor home. Despite the impending tempest, she stands there, a lone cowgirl in a shape-hugging, boot-grazing white skirt and Western hat. She has already breezed through several scenes of a photo layout with her signature good-natured grace. In smooth, just-perceptible shades, her expression evolves with every shot.

Adventurous...click...sensuous...click...mischievous...click...amorous...click...

Another thunder blast. "I'm not kidding," she says, her voice quavering. Still she maintains her supermodel face while the photographer fires off a few more frames.

Niki knows about being a lightning rod. In her 31 years she has attracted great fame and also great tragedy. On the cover of *Seventeen* at age 14, the girl-next-door from Cooper City High was a millionaire at 16, a bride at 18, a mother of twins at 19 and a divorcée at 20. She experienced the death of her beloved younger sister in 1995, and came close to death herself in 2001. Over the past year she has embarked on a new phase of her life, opening a clothing boutique, launching a fragrance and starting a foundation to help women in business. With Jake and Hunter, now 11, about to start middle school, she seems to be embracing womanhood.

"I feel amazing," she says in her silken tone. "I'm not a size 4 anymore. I'm a full-figured girl right now, and I love it. My hips just grew in the last two years, and I love them. I'm happy where I am."

She is living in Brentwood, Tenn., the stylishly laid-back suburb south of Nashville that is home to a panoply of country musicians. Niki fell for the area while visiting her manager a few years ago.

"It's just my speed," she says. "The boys can ride their dirt

bikes. They have friends in the neighborhood...I saw 12 deer in our back yard."

Brentwood residents are accustomed to seeing celebrities, and Niki blends right in. She was Keith Urban's love interest in the 2002 country video *Somebody Like You*, and the two were linked for several years, though officially "just good friends." Her seven-acre spread is next to the former home of Tim McGraw and Faith Hill, which is why the wooded, one-lane road is still blocked to keep out tour buses.

Behind a black iron gate, Niki's red-brick, three-chimney home has welcoming white porches, a skateboard in the driveway and a trampoline in the back yard. The face that has graced more than 400 magazine covers bears no discernible makeup as Niki welcomes visitors late one April afternoon. She has slipped out of her office-wear of tight Paige Denims and flip-flops into loose gray jersey pants and slippers, but the white vintage blouse remains. Her long, honey-blond hair is pulled into a random ponytail. She calls for Jake and Hunter, and the boys make the rounds shaking hands with far-beyond-fifth-grade gentility.

"Eleven is the new 20," their mom says. "They're good boys. I'm very blessed. They're responsible..." she pauses, "...most times." Already 5-foot-3 and lanky, with long, golden-streaked brown hair and their mother's wide smile, the identical twins have the look of young rockers, a description that surely would please the aspiring musicians. The boys ride dirt bikes in the woods beyond several acres of mowed lawn, and Niki often joins them.

"I definitely have a tomboy side. I bite my nails. I'm not afraid of getting dirty. I love sports. And I'm a road dog now," she says referring to her penchant for riding her Harley-Davidson Road King. "You don't have to talk to anybody. It's nice to get in your own head and day dream."

It is no surprise that Niki revels in motorcycle escapes. The woman who exudes warmth and familiarity on camera admits to a certain wariness with strangers. "It's really hard to trust people," she says. "I had a hard time with that growing up because I always thought people wanted something from me. It's refreshing



WARDROBE COURTESY OF A STYLE IS BORN, FORT LAUDERDALE

















when people treat you like a human being.”

Her father, Ken Taylor, a retired Florida Highway Patrol officer who now works for the Broward Sheriff's Office in Cooper City, says despite her celebrity, his daughter is still down-to-earth. “To be the way she is at this stage in life with all she has been through is surprising,” he says. He doesn't worry about her — at least, he says, not beyond typical fatherly concern. “Niki is a pretty independent girl. She has a good support system. She's a Christian. We put our faith in that.”

Family, her mother's lasagna and business pursuits frequently lure Niki back home to Pembroke Pines. Last fall she appeared at Hollywood Choppers in Seminole Paradise. Commenting on the growth of the Seminole Hard Rock complex, she recalls the days when bingo was the biggest thing in west Hollywood. “I used to go to the bingo hall with my boyfriend in high school, when I used to smoke. It was the best.” She is featured in this year's Live Life...Levinson Style campaign for Levinson Jewelers in Plantation. Dressed in hip-hugging jeans and iced with diamonds for an ad layout, she leans casually on — what else? — a motorcycle.

She has shared her passion for “big-boy bikes” with her father, presenting him with a Harley Road King last October. Trim and 6 feet tall, her dad is in great shape, Niki says. “Sixty-five is the new 45.”

She remains very close to both her parents and to older sister, Joelle — “my Joie” — who lives with her husband and four children in Loxahatchee. She also keeps in touch with several close friends here, including Tonya Wolf of Pembroke Pines, who spent Mother's Day weekend with her in Tennessee.

“We went shopping in her store,” she says, which harkens to childhood games with Niki and Krissy. “We would play store, tag everything...Mama T even bought us a real pricing machine and cash register.” The Taylor home was always a gathering place, she says, with hot lunches, warm brownies and fun. Wolf and a couple other friends still get together there once a week to enjoy Mama T's “amazing dinners,” watch *American Idol* and knit scarves.

**B**arbara Taylor, youthful and blond at 58, with those same expansive cheekbones and chiseled nose, is now a professional photographer based in Hollywood. Photography was just a hobby when she submitted her 13-year-old daughter's picture to a modeling agency. Quickly signed to a contract, Niki was soon all over the newsstands.

“She performed incredibly in front of the camera,” says

Irene Marie, whose Miami Beach management group represented Niki until age 17. “She had a spontaneity that was unparalleled. I have never seen a model who moved so beautifully.”

Under her mother's tutelage, Niki distinguished herself not only with her looks and talent, but also with her professionalism. “Barbara taught her to write thank-you notes to everyone and instilled in her a great way of doing business,” Irene Marie says. “Niki had an amazing personality — nice, kind and a true professional. And she was just a teen.”

Modeling assignments and endorsement deals poured in, and at 17 Niki signed a multi-million-dollar contract with CoverGirl. She strode down runways in New York, Paris and Milan, yet she remained a Cooper City High School student, continuing her studies while traveling, always with one of her parents along. “I remember her sitting backstage at a Paris fashion show, bent over her English book,” her dad says.

Niki's early career was a family affair. Older sister Joelle was her personal assistant; younger sister, Krissy, also took to modeling. Their mother remembers taking the girls to Milan for a runway show. Krissy, 13, accompanied Niki to a fitting and ended up in the Blumarine show with her sister. “They came out from different sides and looked surprised that they were on the runway at the same time,” Barbara Taylor says. “They joined hands and walked down together...It was the neatest thing.”

Niki recalls the joy of sharing the limelight with Krissy. “I wish I could bring back those days,” she says.

At age 18, Niki shocked her family when she eloped to Las Vegas with a 23-year-old semi-pro football player named Matt Martinez, whom she had known only a few months. A year later Niki was pregnant with twins. Although she gained 70 pounds, she quickly shed the weight after Jake and Hunter were born and went back to work. However, her marriage to Martinez was troubled, and the worst was yet to come.

In the early morning of July 2, 1995, Niki arrived at her parents' home and found 17-year-old Krissy unconscious on the floor. Despite their efforts to revive her, she was pronounced dead at the hospital. The cause was a rare heart condition called ARVD, arrhythmogenic right ventricular dysplasia. The family continues to work for awareness of the disease, which can be detected with a simple electrocardiogram. Krissy's name is tattooed on Niki's left hand, along with a blue daisy. “I know she is always with me,” she says.

The next year, Niki's marriage ended in divorce, and she began dating. Florida Panther center Rob

**TO PAGE 102**



# Niki Taylor

**FROM PAGE 73** Niedermayer was her longtime boyfriend. Her supermodel status made her a hot, see-and-be-seen commodity, as evidenced by reports that linked her — along with Madonna and Jennifer Lopez — to Miami nightclub entrepreneur Chris Paciello, who was sentenced to 10 years in prison for racketeering and robbery. “We were not romantically involved,” Niki says.

By the late '90s, despite her professional success, Niki says she felt empty. “I was a first-time mother, and there was the divorce and the death of my sister. I thought there had to be something more than this.” Surrounded by Christian people, she says, she began to seek answers. “I was saved in '98, but I've really been walking with God since 2000. I don't have to worry about anything because I'm not in charge.”

Her faith has been tested, however. Early in 2001, she went into rehab to overcome addiction to the painkiller Vicodin. “When you are saved...it doesn't mean that everything is perfect,” she says during a recent visit to her parents' home.

She credits faith and prayers, as well as great doctors, for her recovery from injuries she received in the April 2001 accident in Atlanta, when a friend's car crashed into a utility pole. Getting out without a scratch, she was greatly relieved, but only for a moment. Suddenly, her stomach hurt like fire, she says, and she fell to the ground.

She awoke a month later at Atlanta's Grady Memorial Hospital with devastating internal injuries. “My liver had been sliced in two, my lungs collapsed, I flat-lined twice...It was a miracle that I survived,” she says, adding that she still has rods in her back, which doctors have told her must be replaced. She admits to struggles in her



BARBARA TAYLOR



JOELLE TAYLOR



BARBARA TAYLOR

“I hope to live long enough to see Jake and Hunter graduate high school and college and get married and have kids. It's part of being a mom,” Niki says. From top: Niki with twin sons, Hunter, top, and Jake; parents Barbara and Ken; Niki, right, with sister Krissy on the runway in Milan; and Niki with sisters Joelle, center, and Krissy.

recovery, which involved dozens of operations. “As time went on, I realized I was given a second chance, and I had to get better for my boys...I don't know what my purpose is, but I'll find it eventually.”

As the photographer adjusts her camera, Niki sits with legs outstretched on the hood of her prized 1978 black Trans Am and leans far forward, thanks to twice-a-week yoga sessions, musing on how much fun it would be to go mudding in the pasture. She has always enjoyed adventure — sky-diving, scuba diving, bungee jumping. When asked about any fears, she answers, “Just the normal ones — I don't want to be burned to death, suffocate, bleed to death. Then again, I'm not afraid of dying.”

Looking back, she says she has been strengthened by her challenges. Last fall she ran into Petra Nemcova, the model who suffered serious injuries and lost her boyfriend in the Asian tsunami. She signed a bottle of her fragrance for her: “One survivor to the next.”

“It doesn't matter who you are, I think everybody goes through their seasons. Sometimes God's going to throw something at you. Let's see how you're going to handle this, Nicole Taylor.” It's important that you surround yourself with a great support system.”

In addition to her family, Niki's support system includes her manager at Tri Star Sports & Entertainment Group, Lou Taylor, and assistant, Robin Greenhill, whom she considers close friends. They ride Harleys together and attend Calvary Chapel, where Rob Taylor, Lou's husband, is pastor. “Before I met Lou, it was just me and my boyfriend or whoever I was with. Now I have great women in my life.”

As for guys, she says, laughing, “I love all boys.” Then she offers that there are two men in her life — Jake and Hunter. Indeed,

with no nanny, she is a busy working mom, driving her sons to school, overseeing homework and getting dinner — a chicken was in the crock pot this day.

In between she exercises with personal trainer Maureen Welsh — “I'm married to her right now” — and goes to her Tri Star office to work on orders and inventory for her nearby store, Abbie & Jesse's. She and Lou Taylor are partners in the hip, denim-centric boutique, which is named for their Maltese dogs. Recently, Niki was reading through book-length business-plan submissions for a competition organized through her begin Foundation for the Advancement of Women in Business, another joint venture with Taylor. “Tri Star will help the winner develop her plan,” she says, adding that 20 percent of the profits from begin by Niki Taylor, her orange Creamsicle-scented fragrance, go into the foundation.

The evolution from model to businesswoman began during discussions with her management team after the accident. “They asked me what I wanted to do...I said I wanted to be my own boss. I've always been the face for other people. I wanted to do this for myself.” A professed “perfume junkie,” with a refrigerator full of fragrances in her garage and several in her purse, she decided to develop her own. “I chose the name begin because the word meant so much to me. I've had a second chance at life...Well, I've had many chances at life. I was starting a new season, so it was a perfect fit.”

It was time for a change, she says. “I've been working for 16 years. In my head I still feel like I'm 17, but in my body maybe not quite so young.”

When asked about future plans, she talks about launching more fragrances and expanding Abbie & Jesse's. She dreams about acting, and — the brass ring — being the face of CoverGirl again. “But



ROBERT DUVOS, SUNSENTINEL



From top: Niki, right, with actress Rebecca Romijn at the MTV Fashionably Loud awards on South Beach in 1999; in her CoverGirl campaign, which began when she was 17; her recent Levinson Jewelers ad; and at an orphanage in Southeast Asia last summer with the human rights group International Justice Mission.

right now, I'm really content,” she says.

Niki does wonder, at times, what the future holds for her personally, and she mentions the possibility of marriage in the next five years. “Children pass through your life, and your husband is the one that you're supposed to grow old with.” She stops for a moment. “That scares me when I say that. It's just that I'm single, and I've had a great thing going on for so long.”

While on a trip to Southeast Asia last summer with the human rights group International Justice Mission, she was moved by the plight of the children in an orphanage and decided she would like to adopt a daughter. She wants to return with Jake and Hunter to share what she has learned. “The trip really opened my eyes,” she says. “We're very spoiled here in America.”

Niki is changing in a ramshackle barn, doing the work that promotes the image that sells the fragrance that gives her the freedom to pursue her dreams. Behind a towel held by Greenhill, she squeezes into skin-tight cropped jeans and a midriff-baring top that exposes a phoenix on her ribcage. She has several tattoos, which are often digitally removed in photographs. “It's mine...it's not for everyone else,” she says. Climbing up to the loft, she leans back against a rope attached to the rafters as the storm rages overhead. The roof is sound, yet she recoils with another thunderclap. “I guess lightning is one of my fears.” Still, she keeps her supermodel face. A face that's courageous... click... glamorous... click... joyous... click...

Freelance writer John Parkyn contributed to this story. For information about Niki Taylor's begin Foundation for the Advancement of Women in Business, visit [www.nikitaylor.com](http://www.nikitaylor.com); begin by Niki Taylor is sold at JCPenney.