

Our Survivor homegirl!

Exclusive tvplus chats to SA-born Survivor cast-away Gillian Larson about realising her dream in the US reality series.

Gillian Larson



Gillian and her husband Ron (far left) with their large family



Gillian with fellow Survivors Randy Bailey and Michelle Chase

It's not easy to become a contestant on Survivor – thousands apply, and only a few are selected each season. South African-born Gillian Larson tried repeatedly, and finally made it through the process when she was selected for Survivor: Gabon. tvplus rang her up in California, and she told us that even though she left the country 40 years ago, she still feels very South African. “I haven't lost my South African qualities at all. I can still speak Afrikaans – though my American tongue gets in the way every now and then,” Gillian assures us as we chat.

Gillian (63 – she was 61 at the time of filming Survivor in 2008) was born Gillian Dalton in 1947 in Modderfontein, outside of Johannesburg, where her father worked as a doctor. She attended high school in Pretoria, and from an early age was very athletic. “I've enjoyed sports all my life, so doing Survivor was a natural step for me. I remember being involved in tennis, hockey and swimming – and even playing hockey for Northern Transvaal for three years during high school.”

Gillian went on to study nursing, and set off for Europe to travel and get work experience. And that's when she met the love of her life,

her future husband, Ron (an American who served in the US Airforce). “We met inside the beer halls in Germany, and I actually wasn't looking for a relationship,” she laughs. “I decided he was a pretty decent guy, and wanted to spend the rest of my life with him, so we married 18 months later and moved to the USA, where we've been living for 40 years now.”

The adventure junkie – who has dived with Great White sharks, walked the Great Wall of China, and hiked the Grand Canyon – has three happily married daughters and six grandchildren, which she considers her proudest achievement in life.

“When I applied to be on Survivor, the producers asked me what my greatest achievement was, and I told them it was my awesome family. No other accomplishment or adventure in my life can compare to that,” she explains.

So why did Gillian want to be in Survivor? “I was travelling around South Africa in 1999, and I heard about the casting for this new show called Survivor. When I got back to the US, I watched the first few episodes, and thought it was the dumbest game ever. But then I started enjoying the challenges, and

that was it – I knew I had to be a part of the game,” she recalls.

Gillian's persistence finally paid off in 2008 (after 15 applications and various auditions) – just when she was about to give up after nearly being selected a few times.

“I'd actually made it quite far in the casting process for Fans vs Favorites (season 16), and then they didn't pick me. I guess it was because they had me in mind for Gabon – being of African descent – which was the following season.”

Gillian made sure she prepared for Survivor. “I read 64 books on how to survive in any situation, and I learnt how to catch fish using my pants. I already knew a lot about living in the wild from my childhood, including burning dried elephant dung as an insect repellent.”

She says reality only hit her when the game began. “We were just walking through the veld when Jeff Probst welcomed us to the start of the game. I had a sense of accomplishment in that I'd finally made it onto the show – competing for the \$1 million in prize money!”

So what was the one lesson Gillian learnt from being on Survivor? “I learnt that you can dream it, believe it, prepare for it, and then do it! It's a motto I live my life by every day.”

Since taking part in the show, Gillian has given 170 motivational talks in the US (so far), speaking about her Survivor experience and how it's affected her life. “People in the US forget they have so much freedom here – whereas I came from a country where people's freedom was taken away from them. I have used Survivor as a platform to inspire and help others.”

Gillian, good luck from all of us back home – we're rooting for you to win the million bucks! +