

explains. "I boiled water, chopped wood for fire, dug up worms and opened up termite mounds to look for food. I even made a fishing line out of old rope and turned an elephant carcass into furniture."

She was also happy to share survival tips with the younger tribe members but for the most part these fell on deaf ears – video footage showed them rolling their eyes behind her back and complaining they found her "annoying".

The lack of enthusiasm, energy and leadership in Gillian's tribe puzzled her.

"They had absolutely no interest in anything," she says. "I sort of tried to interject little comments but they never tried to stop and listen. Nobody cared."

What she's most disappointed about is how she was portrayed. She feels the edited version of the show didn't do her justice.

"Survivor really didn't show who I am. Yes, I'm that happy, positive person who came across loud and clear but almost everyone who knows me said, 'Where was the rest of you?'"

BORN in Modderfontein, east of Johannesburg, Gillian has fond memories of her African childhood.

"Things were different back then. We didn't have TV so we'd spend most of our time playing outside," she recalls with a tiny hint of an American accent. At school she excelled at competitive sports such as tennis,

SUPPLIED



ABOVE: Gillian has a large family. She moved to the United States after marrying her American husband, Ron. They have three children and six grandchildren.

swimming and hockey.

Later she studied nursing at Johannesburg General Hospital (now Charlotte Maxeke Johannesburg Hospital) until the travel bug bit and she headed for Europe.

"My base was a house in London I shared with five other friends and every time I ran out of money I'd come home to work, then scuttle off again."

She wasn't looking for love, preferring her own company as she hitchhiked across Scotland, Wales and Ireland, but a chance encounter with Ron Larson, an American, in a Munich beer hall changed everything.

"I wasn't at all interested in a relationship but he pursued me," she says. They married 18 months later in South Africa and moved to the United States. Forty years on Gillian, now retired from nursing, and Ron, who gave up teaching for

a career in insurance, have a full, busy life with their three daughters and six grandchildren.

She giggles as she recalls her efforts to teach her children Afrikaans.

"I spoke it to them all the time but kids look at you like 'yeah right' even if you speak English," Gillian says.

But they picked up a few choice expressions.

"Like they'll say to me, 'You're making a helluva *gemors* [a big mess] around here.'"

Survivor has opened doors for her and she's now in demand as a motivational speaker. Her motto is "dream it, believe it, prepare for it, do it" – something she put into practice when preparing for Survivor. Before going to Gabon she read 64 survival books, took archery lessons and overcame her fear of snakes.

"In my talks I try to inspire others to do what they want to

NOW YOU KNOW

- Gillian and a family member were offered a spot on *The Amazing Race* but she turned it down because she wanted to be on *Survivor*.
- Favourite food Lamb and any kind of fruit – especially guavas and paw paw.
- Favourite drinks Water and the occasional gin and tonic or wine.
- Favourite *Survivor* players Earl Cole (Fiji), Yul Kwon (Cook Islands), Cirie Fields (Micronesia) and Terry Deitz (Panama).

do and be the best people they can be. I've done five talks this week alone and did my 178th talk yesterday," she says.

Gillian especially enjoys talking to schoolkids. "There will be about 400 to 500 kids listening to this old lady prattle on, absolutely starstruck."

She often hangs out with *Survivor* alumni and is organising a big charity event in April to raise money to combat breast cancer. "It's called Reality Rally and there will be 100 stars from 34 shows," she says. "It's happening here in Temecula and the whole town is on board."

Gillian is also looking forward to reconnecting with her Gabon tribemates in LA for the upcoming finale of *Survivor Nicaragua*, the latest season of the show, currently airing in America.

"I never thought I'd be going to all these glamorous Hollywood parties at the age of 63," she says. "But no matter where I am in the world I'll always be a South African at heart." □

EXTRA SOURCE: THEDEADBOLT.COM



MAIN PICTURE: Tousle-haired Gillian Larson is the first South African-born contestant on the US reality show, Survivor. LEFT and ABOVE: Scenes from Gabon, including the tough-as-nails reward and immunity challenges.