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## Creative Transformation

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PAGE 14

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Families worldwide have enduring memories of actress and model Allison Balson and her days as the adopted, "nasty" Nancy Oleson character in the wildly-popular television series, *Little House on the Prairie*. The series is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year.

Today, however, many more people have become fans of Balson for her charitable activities that benefit active-duty troops and military families through her career transformation as a singer, songwriter, and celebrity spokesperson for Operation Happy Note. This is a volunteer nonprofit organization whose mission is to send musical instruments to deployed service men and women around the world.

A self-described "Army brat," Balson credits being raised in a military family with her strong sense of values and her devotion to charitable causes that focus on military families. "Over the years, I have been told numerous times from military spouses how im-

portant the *Little House on the Prairie* TV show was to their family," she recalls. "My character being the adopted 'nasty' Nancy Oleson kid was relatable and entertaining. I have been told that watching the show became a weekly gathering activity for the family. They would reserve that hour when the show was broadcast to be together."

Balson was born at Walter Reed Medical Hospital and grew up at the Presidio in San Francisco, CA, where her father was based in the Army. "For me it was a dream play world, with a backyard that seemed magical and massive because it was open to nature," she reminisces. "Outside of our military housing, the base grounds gave me and my brother hours of fun riding our Big Wheels. My mom would pack sandwiches for us, and off we would go. The Presidio was safe. My mom never had to worry about us going off to explore, and play."

"Growing up at an early age in such a utopia, really impacted my imagination, and stimulated my creative wiles," she continues. "I would spend countless hours climbing up and rolling down sand hills, playing hide and seek around old bunkers, and dance and sing at the top of my lungs among the California pines. I remember the base as a community full of families with children. My favorite activity was going to the Sunday double features at the movie theater. I spent many hours watching movies, admiring the actors and fictional stories, and eating way too much buttered popcorn and red licorice."



Balson's mother Bernice also recalls those days fondly: "Being part of the military was a community of like-minded and patriotic individuals," she explains. "We enjoyed living on military bases across the United States. My husband was offered overseas

assignments, but this didn't happen. We were all young-marrieds, recently married some with children, and the military provided housing for all of us. There was a hospital on the base, a movie theater, a commissary where you would buy food and a PX where you would buy other essentials. Military life was exciting and always a new adventure. Raising two children on the military base was perfect. They had a lot of freedom to go out and explore in and enjoy movies on the weekend on the base."

Along with the positive aspects of growing up in the military community, there were also challenges, Balson notes, especially having her father frequently away on deployments. "Because my father was often away, my mother kept me busy with my interests: dancing, ballet, tap, jazz; singing, classically trained opera; and playing instruments, piano, guitar. She realized that my interests were more than just a passing fancy. As some kids find their passion in sports, I found mine in the creative arts, specifically entertaining. These lessons parlayed into professional work."

At the age of five, Balson started modeling for San Francisco department stores, as well as singing with the San Francisco Children's Opera, and she began dancing with the San Francisco Ballet. She also began appearing in television commercials.

"One of my favorite commercials was a Vivitar camera commercial with Orson Welles," she notes. "It was a thrill to work with the esteemed actor. Mr. Welles was a powerful personality on the set, and he took good care of me as we worked together. Now that I reflect, I am realizing acting/modeling provided additional family for me. I loved my 'on set' Moms, Dads, and siblings. So, the entertainment industry became an extended family."

Balson said she wrote the song "My Friend" this year to honor the memory of Little House's "Dad," Michael Landon and to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the show. "I received a heartfelt letter from a woman who grew up the daughter of a military family and remembered watching me on the show," she notes. "She said that she loved to watch Michael Landon (Pa Ingalls), because he resembled her own father who at the time was stationed abroad. When she listened to my lyrics, the words

resonated with her own feelings of how Michael Landon became a symbolic father figure during those times."

Balson notes that military families often share "a commitment to duty mixed with uncertainty, fear and loneliness. Feeling separated, being away from loved ones, is hard. These feelings are what resonate with me personally, because I have missed loved

ones, because of duty, and the sacrifices that had to be made because of what this entails."

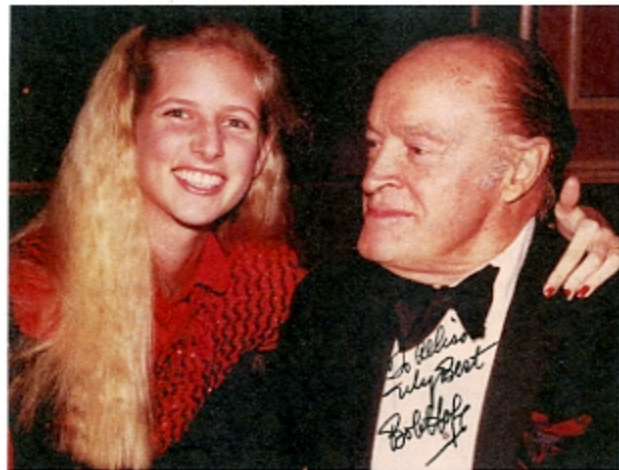
She points out that the separation from her father became a pivotal turning point in her development as an actor and in her subsequent work as a singer/songwriter and radio host. "I had an acting coach who taught me to look within, and use personal experiences to be the foundation of feelings for all of my characters," she explains. "I started to use my piano and guitar skills to do more than simply play artists' songs: I began writing lyrics and putting the words to melodies to express my thoughts

and feelings. Songwriting has always been a very personal journey. The lyrics are my journal—an emotional outlet—and this all started during my young years as a member of a military family.

"When I developed and hosted my syndicated radio show, Music Scene Live, I parlayed the influence songwriting had on me as a child, teenager and adult," she adds. "The Music Scene Live radio show's mission is based on the idea that music transcends. Songs are a universal language. Music has no barriers, divide, and separation. Music has the ability to unite, guide and heal, and songwriters use lyrics to express their experiences and emotions."

Balson has also been heavily involved in military-focused organizations, including the USO. "I have always admired Bob Hope and his commitment to keeping military families connected via the activities offered by the USO," she points out. "I was fortunate to meet Bob Hope and thank him personally for his support of our troops and their families at a gala event hosted in his honor. Other celebrities who were present at the event in support of him and the USO included Jimmy Stewart, Dean





Martin, Phyllis Diller, Danny Thomas, Jamie Farr. I have also had the opportunity to meet other celebrity supporters of our military families at various fundraising events, including Jay Leno, Brooke Shields, William Shatner.

"My parents showed me the importance of supporting military focused charities, not only because of being stationed in various cities, and dealing with separation, but also because the transition from active duty to civilian life is difficult," she adds. "There are numerous challenges faced and military-focused charities provide supportive services to address specific needs of service men and women, as well as their families."

Since 2008, Balson has been a celebrity spokesperson for Operation Happy Note, which sends musical instruments to deployed troops around the world. "Musical instruments are an important part of life," she declares. "An instrument allows for emotional release and free expression," providing troops with "moments away from the realities of their surroundings, and helping them cope with being away from their loved ones."

Balson also is regularly called upon to perform an acoustic version of the national anthem at sporting arenas, festivals, and charity events. She says these types of events help inspire her creativity, and she hopes to inspire other military families in the same way.

At one recent event, the Blue Angels performed "a powerful, beautiful, and artistic air show," she recalls. "As I watched the jets, I realized that my dream has always been to soar in life with grace, creativity, and precision like the Blue Angels. Creativity in any form, I believe, is a blessing, and can help military families cope with the specific challenges they are faced with and asked to manage on a daily basis. It continues to be my hope that through entertaining—acting, writing music, singing, performing, recording, hosting, producing – I can achieve my dream, all the while striving to be a better self for my loved ones, community, and country." 🇺🇸

## STAND TOGETHER



Growing up in a military family, Allison Balson learned early on about the importance of maintaining strong relationships with friends and family.

"I learned the importance of maintaining friendships over the years, because memories shared are special, and are a part of our fabric," she explains. "It takes effort, but keeping special friendships close and connected is worth it."

"As my parents faced the challenge of having to make the decision to split the family for a while, so do many military families face a similar challenge," she continues. "What I learned in dealing with the anxiety of separation is to understand that family is always there no matter the distance, and the love is always present."

This understanding helped spur Balson's commitment to Operation Happy Note, and also helped inspire her song "Stand," from a collaborative album with the artist Stone and "First," which became an anthem for Operation Happy Note. "Thanks to the generous support of Captain D's Seafood restaurant company, a CD single of the song was produced and 500 CDs were shipped along with the donated instruments to our troops," Balson points out. "The lyrics from 'Stand' reflect my belief that when we STAND as an individual, and we STAND as a community, we STAND united."



### STAND LYRICS:

*"Can't lose my mind, perfection makes me blind to the world around, you're all I see  
Can't lose my time, you are my light  
In reality, you're all I need*

*I'll stand with you, holding you tight  
I'll stand with you, day and night  
I'll stand with you, Won't you stand with me*

*Winds of change blow sometimes  
Path beneath takes you far away  
Stand strong knowing truth, Stand strong knowing you"*