



From the grey skies of Walford to the white beaches of Los Angeles – Danniella is living the California dream (above). Mixing business with pleasure, the animal-lover has started Barkingham Palace, where pets are royally pampered (below and right, with her ten-year-old Maltese terrier Daisy)

## ONCE TROUBLED 'EASTENDERS' STAR DANNIELLA WESTBROOK

**S**he's instantly recognisable, yet there is something subtly different about Danniella Westbrook. The former *EastEnders* star is still platinum blonde and still teetering about on vertiginous heels. But the casual clothes, the sunglasses perched on top of her head and the white Maltese terrier weaving between her legs suggest she's more California girl than a Walford one.

Which isn't perhaps too surprising. We're sitting in the sprawling Spanish-style bungalow in Huntington Beach, about an hour south of Los Angeles, where Danniella, 37, now lives with her second husband, Kevin Jenkins, 43, their



JUMPER: ZARA; JEANS: J BRAND

**'This is the best time ever because we're a closer family now than we were when we had money. I'm so grateful for where - and who - I am today'**



(LEFT) DRESS: ME & BLUE. (RIGHT) TOP: ZARA



**INVITES US TO JOIN HER IN CALIFORNIA AS SHE EXPLAINS HOW SHE HAS TURNED HER LIFE AROUND WITH THE HELP OF GOD - AND DOGS**

ten-year-old daughter, Jodie, and Kai, almost 15, her son from a previous relationship.

When I remind Danniella that we've met before, her reply is instantaneous. "If it was more than ten years ago, then I'd like to apologise for anything I may have said," she says. And she's not joking.

"I was just a kid who turned into a spoilt brat. It was drink and drugs and partying with the wrong people. There was no one keeping an eye on me."

In 1990, at the age of 16, Danniella was cast as *EastEnders'* Sam Mitchell, younger sister to Grant and Phil. Within a decade, she had a relationship with former East 17 singer Brian Harvey and a first marriage behind her, had left and returned to the

soap several times – she was notably asked to leave for good in 2000 – and had a cocaine habit that was destroying her life.

Looking back to that time today, Danniella says: "I was out of control. I had an illness, because that's what addiction is, and I needed help. It was Barbara Windsor [who played her screen mother Peggy Mitchell] and June Brown [Walford's Dot Cotton] who spoke up on my behalf and I'll always be grateful to them."

**FAITH HEALING**

But that was then and this is now. In a dramatic turn of events, Danniella has turned her back on drugs

and alcohol and found religion. "I've always believed in God, but it wasn't until I was on holiday here and someone gave me a flyer advertising the local church that I decided to go along and see for myself," she recalls. "The man preaching started making sense to me. Instead of switching off, I was really listening.

"When we finally moved out here, in May of last year, we decided to go back to that church with the kids. Quite quickly, it became a part of our lives. Now, I read the Bible and I understand what it's saying. We pray before we eat each day... I just find that Christianity works in my life. I don't go shouting it from the rooftops, but I do believe ▶

**'We were living the dream. But I watched as the man I loved broke apart in front of my eyes'**



(LEFT) SHORTS: PRIMARK; SHOES: YSL (RIGHT) DRESS: JUICY COUTURE

Though she'll forever be associated with her former heavy drug use and wild behaviour, Danniella says that she has changed since going through rehab, moving to California and finding God. "My brother – he's a policeman – came over to see us in June and he said that I wasn't selfish any more, that I thought about what I said and did, that I'd stopped being judgmental," she says

Jesus Christ is my lord and saviour and I don't mind saying so."

Her faith has had quite an effect. "I used to go on the Internet and read all the mean things people said about me. I'd sit there, crying my eyes out. Now, I let it all wash over me. When I went back into *EastEnders* for six weeks last summer, people said I looked so much older, but I didn't care. I've been a drug addict and an alcoholic. To be where I am today without any health issues, well, thanks be to God."

Religion is just one surprising development in Danniella's life. In February, she opened a salon for pampered pooches. In typical over-the-top Californian style, it has its own coat of arms, with the Latin motto *In Canis Nos Fides* – "In Dogs We Trust".

Explains Danniella of Barkingham Palace, as the salon is called: "I've always had dogs and I wanted to do something new." She adds, smiling: "It's been good fun. I'm really enjoying it." So much so, in fact, that she's toying with opening another branch.



But how come she's in California in the first place? In 2004, when the family were on holiday in Florida, news of an approaching hurricane prompted them to seek an alternative. LA was the best option and the only accommodation they could find was in Huntington Beach.

"We woke up the next morning, walked to the beach and fell in love with the place," says Danniella. The family subsequently spent several holidays there before relocating last year. "We needed to withdraw, to recharge our batteries, to learn how to be the best family we could possibly be," she explains.

#### FALL AND RISE

Business troubles also prompted the move. In 2009, Kevin was the founding chairman of Premier Despatch, a chauffeur and courier service based in London. "We were living the dream at the time," says Danniella. "We had a house near Rochester worth £2.5million; the kids were at the best school in Kent."

But when the financial meltdown hit the City, Premier's blue-chip

clients no longer required its services. The company went into administration and was sold.

"I stood and watched as the man I loved broke apart in front of my eyes. In those circumstances, a fabulous house meant nothing to me and we moved to somewhere smaller.

"Because of all that's happened to both of us, I feel now that Kevin and I and the two kids are our own little fortress. I used to think I had to drive a Range Rover Sport and wear a Rolex and the kids had to be dressed from head to toe in Ralph Lauren. But it's all nonsense. We could live on a council estate. I wouldn't care, as long as we were together."

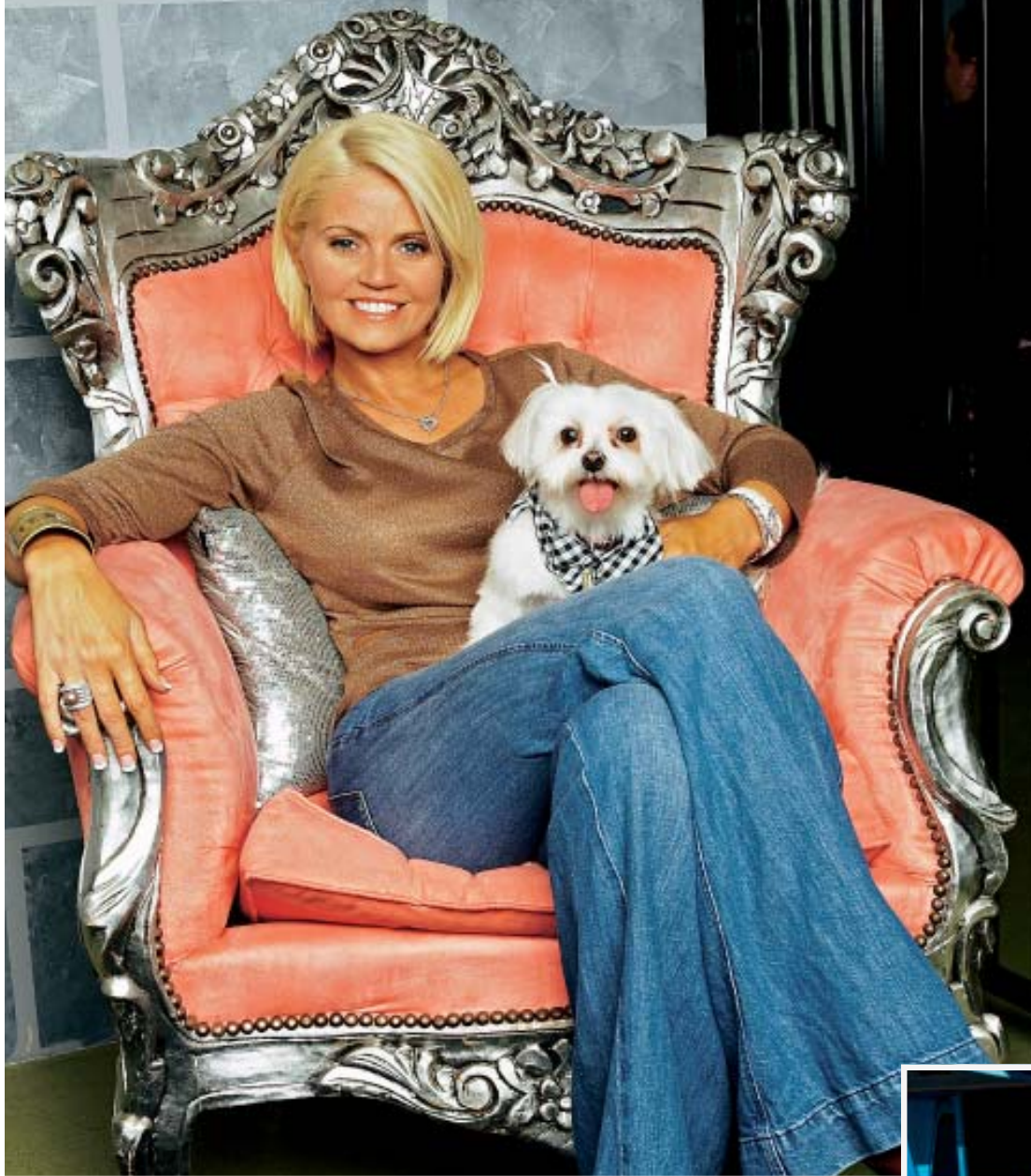
Luckily, her own career fortunes were on the rise. She was invited back for a stint in *EastEnders* in 2009 (and for a second time in 2010) and in the early months of last year, she took part in *Dancing on Ice*, finishing an impressive fourth.

"I absolutely loved it. It took me out of my bubble. I'd do it all again tomorrow. In fact, there's the possibility of doing the tour next year and I might just say

Danniella's rollercoaster life has seen her live in then lose a £2.5m mansion, but despite the loss of wealth, her family (husband Kevin, daughter Jodie and son Kai, with Kevin's daughter Jordan, below, in 2009) are happier than ever



ADDITIONAL PHOTO: RETNA PICTURES



**'I've been a drug addict and an alcoholic. To be where I am today without any health issues, well, thanks be to God'**

through with drink and drugs, so she knew how to read the signs. She booked me into a rehab clinic in Arizona, where I stayed for three months. I'd been given three weeks to live if I carried on using and abusing. I remember that time and it still makes me sad. I was in a really lonely, empty place. It's why I'm so grateful for where – and who – I am today. I could so easily be dead."

When she returned from Arizona, in 2001, Danniella attended 90 meetings in 90 days for recovering drug addicts and alcoholics. "I have an addictive personality. So what was I going to do, now that I wasn't using drugs or drink? It might have been shopping. It might have been gambling. Instead, I found God."

Does she have any regrets? "Yes, of course," she says. "I regret hurting people through what I said and did. And I regret the wasted years eaten up by drink and drugs. But now I'm doing the best I can on a daily basis and I'm not hurting anybody."

She makes no pretence of the fact that she'd "go back to *EastEnders* in a heartbeat". But, in the meantime, the thoroughly sorted Danniella Westbrook is living one day at a time and living it to the limit of her capabilities.

"This is the best time ever, even if it's been hard financially, because we're a closer family now than we were when we had money. I look forward with hope. Every day, I wake up and ask God what I can do to help make things better." **H**

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**A shaggy dog's tale: Barkingham Palace is the perfect marriage of Danniella's business skills and her love of animals. "I've always had dogs and I wanted to do something new," she says. When not prettying pooches, the Essex girl can be found on the beach (right)**

yes. My ice-skating partner [Matthew Gonzalez] lives in West Hollywood – we went skating just last week."

Despite these achievements, and her new life in California, Danniella knows she will forever be associated with the infamous photograph, taken more than a decade ago, of her cocaine-ravaged nose. Heavy use of the drug had caused her septum to collapse and the shocking image was splashed across the front pages of the tabloids. The decline of the *EastEnders* star seemed complete.

"But you know something? In some ways, that picture helped save my life," she says. "As much as I hate kids saying to my two, 'Oh, you're the ones with the mum who had no nose,' if it helps

save just one other person, then it will have done some good. That's where addiction took me and people can see that for themselves."

Given that picture, BBC producers had to let Danniella go. "It was a huge compliment when they finally asked me to return in 2009. I was determined to come back bigger and better. I'll always be a drug addict. I'll always be an alcoholic. But I'm ten years clean and sober now and that's the way it's going to stay."

**REHAB TO REAL LIFE**

In many ways, she has her late agent Cheryl Barrymore to thank for that. "God bless her, Cheryl [had] seen all the troubles that her husband Michael [Barrymore] had gone

