

Delta Burke went from a very shy youngster to a household name as the persnickety Suzanne Sugarbaker on the hit TV show "Designing Women." Along the way, she overcame a lifelong battle with eating disorders to become a proud plus-size designer and model, inspiring women everywhere to accept their bodies just the way they are.

You might say that Delta Burke, who was born in Orlando, Florida, in July 1956, is the ultimate Southern beauty queen. Her mother and grandmother — Burke calls them the two most influential people in her life — encouraged her love of playing dress-up and make-believe, and enrolled her in modeling school to boost the shy girl's confidence. The tactic worked, and Burke came out of her shell with a vengeance. She joined a local theater troupe and began entering every beauty contest she could, and eventually she became the youngest winner ever of the Miss Florida pageant at age 17.

But even at this early age, the pressure to succeed started to take a toll. In the months before the Miss America pageant, Burke began to gain weight. In an effort to reshape her full-figured curves, she began popping diet pills, paving the way for a lifelong battle with eating disorders.

Burke didn't place in the Miss America contest, but her performance in the talent competition landed her a scholarship to a drama school in London. When she finished, Burke set out to fulfill her ambition of being a Hollywood somebody, driving cross-country with her beloved grandmother and a truck filled with her belongings. She began landing minor parts and appearing as a guest star on many TV shows. It was during one of these appearances that she met the person who would change the path of her career: producer Linda Bloodworth-Thomason. In 1982, she cast Burke as a scheming ex-beauty queen in "Filthy Rich," a show co-starring actress Dixie Carter.

Four years later, the three women teamed up again. Bloodworth-Thomason asked Burke to revive the ex-beauty queen character in a new series called "Designing Women." The actress became the self-involved Suzanne Sugarbaker — and a TV star was born. The mammoth success of the sitcom had its downside, however. Relations between Bloodworth-Thomason, Burke and co-star Carter became strained, and Burke turned to food to ease the stress. Tabloids began publishing hurtful stories about her weight gain. In an episode entitled "They Shoot Fat Women, Don't They?," Burke got to bite back and address her battle with weight gain publicly — and with dignity.

While coping with the negative publicity surrounding her weight gain, Burke met her Mr. Right, actor Gerald McRaney. Older and twice divorced, "Mac" was so smitten that he arranged to get a part on "Designing Women" as one of Suzanne's ex-husbands; their kissing scene burned up the screen. In 1989, they were married in a no-expense-spared ceremony.

On a less happy note, in 1991, Burke's producers decided not to renew her contract with "Designing Women," despite an Emmy nomination and five successful seasons on the air. Burke was devastated, and admits that as a result, she suffered "a good, old-fashioned nervous breakdown." Eventually, in 1992, she returned to TV with her own show, "Delta," and even made amends with Bloodworth-Thomason, teaming up with her again in "Women of the House" in 1995.

Today, Burke and her husband live in Los Angeles, taking frequent getaways to a Mississippi farm and their favorite city, New Orleans. The actress has launched a successful plus-size clothing line, and continues to act. She has appeared on the TV comedy "Popular" as Cherry Cherry, oil baroness and mom to cheerleader extraordinaire Mary Cherry, as a guest performer on "Touched By An Angel" and "Any Day Now," and as a long-suffering mother in Lifetime's original movie, "Dangerous Child."

Back on the small screen and finally at peace with her body, Burke encourages other women to accept themselves, whether they are size 6 or 16.

The actress has launched a successful plus-size clothing line and written books about both her fashion style and her struggle with weight. Burke has also tackled depression, a disease she now openly admits to struggling with for much of her life. Her TV career is also as busy as ever. She recently co-starred with her husband in the Lifetime Original Movie "Going for Broke." Burke even teamed up with all five of her former cast mates for a "Designing Women" reunion special.