An Interview with Suzanne Somers
by Richard A. Jaffe, Esq.

Suzanne Somers, Hollywood’s mega-mogul and Oprah’s go-to girl for all things female, is about to do for alternative cancer treatment what she did for hormone replacement therapy: blast it into a wild ride full of media slugfests, controversy, and instant awareness. Her newest book, Knockout, will change the way America looks at cancer treatment and prevention, much as her other books changed the way women look at menopause.

I’ve been defending alternative practitioners for the past 25 years – starting with Emanuel Revici, through Stanislaw Burzynski, down to small-town chiropractors and naturopaths - so I know something about the field. Suzanne called me after reading my book Galileo’s Lawyer for advice and to act as a resource for her book. How do you turn down one of the world’s most successful health advocacy authors? Especially one who was shrewd enough to parlay her television fame as a giggle blonde into a mega-million-dollar health and food empire that she started with what was originally a punch line: the ThighMaster, of which she sold 10 million. No one’s making a joke about her impact and her economic reach now. She sells everything from Somersize Veggie Chips ($11.95 for six bags) to the FaceMaster Platinum ($228.95). Her books camp out on the New York Times best-seller list for months, and Ernst & Young has her speak at its Entrepreneur Awards ceremonies.

I think that you’ll enjoy getting to know her as much as I have, so I suggested to Townsend Letter publisher Jonathan Collin that I interview her for this issue and run it with Marcus Cohen’s piece about Knockout in his monthly column. Jonathan agreed, and so here we are.
Suzanne is now best known in our field for her advocacy of bioidentical hormone replacement therapy (BHRT). Before 2004, most menopausal women never heard of bioidentical hormones. But then came Suzanne’s book The Sexy Years, in which she interviewed doctors who were using BHRT to successfully treat women with symptoms of menopause, and it changed the national discussion of hormones. Two years later, she published Ageless: The Naked Truth About Bioidentical Hormones, yet another NY Times best-seller, in which she continued advocating the use of BHRT. She also had the audacity to claim that women could look, feel, and be as vibrant and sexy in their 50s, 60s, 70s and beyond as they were in their earlier lives. In 2008, she published her third book on the subject, Breakthrough, and it too hit the best-seller list.

Clearly there was an audience for her message, and she began to take it to the airwaves with repeat appearances on Larry King, Oprah, Hannity, and Ellen. She also lectured around the country, explaining that women can cure their menopausal maladies without taking horse hormones – the conventional hormone therapy now known to cause cancer and heart attacks.

But let’s back up a little. Anyone who’s old enough to remember Watergate knows that Suzanne became famous from the aforementioned TV show, Three’s Company. She left the show after five seasons in a widely reported contract dispute.

Though this is a magazine about alternative health, I think it’s important for readers to understand her personal history. It shows how she has harnessed her passions, drive, and ambition to a surprising series of successes. As you will see, Suzanne lives in the land of superlatives.

RJ: Suzanne, frankly, the media portrayed you as a greedy actress who overplayed her hand miscalculated her value. Was that it?
SS: And it’s nice to talk to you too! At that time, there were inequities in Hollywood which I didn’t like and tried to change it. The successful men like Alan Alda [M*A*S*H] and Carroll O’Connor [All in the Family] were making 10 to 15 times what any woman was making, and I didn’t think that was fair, especially since my show was the number one show on TV for a couple seasons when we went to renegotiate my contract. I had the highest demographics of all women on TV, which translated into revenue for the network. I felt it was time to share the pot. And it didn’t feel right that there was such a disparity in the salaries between the men and women in the field.

I think the network didn’t want any of the actresses getting “uppity” and thinking they were as valuable as the actors. I found out the hard way that there was a glass ceiling.

My husband/manager made them an opening offer which was considerably lower that what the top male stars were making. They made no counteroffer, called me ungrateful, and fired me on the spot. They immediately contacted a prominent Hollywood gossip columnist and said I was fired because I had made an outrageous salary demand.

I think their attack to portray me as greedy was a calculated strategy because if they could turn the public against me, no other actress on TV would dare to ask for salary parity. They won, and it worked. The point was made that actresses should be grateful for what the studios gave them. Eventually, things changed, but it took time.

The irony was that although the show continued for several years after I left, the viewership greatly diminished.

RJ: Did you have trouble finding work afterwards?
SS: Did I ever. The doors slammed shut. I couldn’t get a job anywhere. It was quite an emotional blow, and of course I second-guessed my choices and decisions, “how could I have let the greatest job in my life slip through my fingers” type of pity-pot stuff.

I managed to be hard on myself for almost a year. Then one day I heard a voice in my head (I hear voices, ha, ha, ha), and it said: “Why are you focused on what you don’t have; why don’t you focus on what you do have?” I thought to myself, what do I have? Then it dawned on me that I had visibility. Enormous visibility. Everyone in America and many parts of the globe knew my name; that was valuable and tangible.

RJ: So what did you do?
SS: One day I said to my husband, Alan Hamel: “You know I can sing. I’d like to become a nightclub performer. With my celebrity and the controversy swirling around me, I think I could bring them in.”

RJ: What made you think you could just start a new career?
SS: You have to understand my beginnings. As I explained in my autobiography, Keeping Secrets, I was the child of an abusive, violent alcoholic father. Writing the book was a revelatory experience for me, and it began my love affair with writing. I had already had published a poetry book called Touch Me, which I believe was just one of those lucky experiences because Johnny Carson had taken a liking to me and invited me on the Tonight Show once a month as the “poetry lady.” I would read Johnny poems, he would do face takes, everyone would laugh, and I began selling as much poetry as Rod McKuen.

RJ: Suzanne Somers, the poetry lady, OK, but what’s that got to do with the price of tea in China or how you thought you could be a Las Vegas entertainer?
SS: It’s circuitous ... takes a little weaving, but follow me on this. ... My childhood trauma required that I was to spend years in therapy. I was a teenage mother at 17 (scandalous at that time), divorced at 18, and then my 5-year-old son was accidentally run over by a car and given a 50/50 chance to live. I felt guilt beyond description. It was the worst event of my life, yet the universe has a way of giving you the tools you need if you are ready to receive.

He was in the hospital for months. I had no money to pay for his bills, no insurance; the pressure on me was overwhelming. I had no family to turn to, because by
this time my father's alcoholism had reached devastating proportions and everyone in my immediate family was fighting to stay alive, each of us in our own private hell.

Severe trauma caused my little son to have horrible nightmares night after night, and no amount of holding him or rocking him could make him better. Finally I took him to the community mental health center, where they agreed to treat him (along with me) according to my ability to pay. They charged me $1 a visit.

My son finished therapy in a year, but the therapist asked me to stay on ... because, as she described it, I had the lowest self-esteem of anyone she had ever met. Alcoholics are bullies, they need to make those around them helpless to keep them near. My father controlled me by convincing me that I was stupid and useless. I believed him. I bought into it. Over time, I grew to know that I was “nothing,” as he repeatedly told me.

After three years of intensive work, my therapist told me to go out and “live my life.” As I left her for the last time, she said what turned out to be profound words: “Remember, Suzanne, the worst is over.” That freed me ... from that moment on, I no longer feared failure; and after what I had been through, failure didn’t seem so bad, and it still doesn’t.

So to segue, when forced out of TV, it wasn’t a big leap for me to try becoming a Las Vegas headliner. Because after all, “The worst that could happen is that I might fail.” So what.

RJ: That’s circuitous all right, but it explains how you seem to learn and grow from adversity.

SS: I do; in fact, that’s my thing.

RJ: So what happened in Vegas?

SS: It worked. People came in droves. I sold out the Las Vegas Hilton every performance for three years. In 1986, I was named female Las Vegas entertainer of the year. Frank Sinatra was the male entertainer of the year. That was very meaningful to me. The whole experience was wonderful, and vindicating in a way, since I felt that I had been essentially kicked out of Hollywood.

I love entertaining, love being in front of an audience. It’s more than singing and dancing. My greatest thrill comes from connecting with people. You know, the audience is in control, there is an exchange between performer and audience. When they respond, you give more, and back and forth and so on. There are nights when I am onstage that it is like electricity, you know ... it sizzles. There is a palpable energy, and I find that as long as you don’t phony it up, as long as you tell them the truth, they are mesmerized.

I am not a mysterious person. There is not much I haven’t shared with the American public, and I feel that is what has bonded me to them. Like everybody else, I’ve had a lot of problems in my life; but I have shared my recovery, which seems to be helpful. I don’t feel better than anyone ... I “am them” and, by working through and overcoming my problems, my life seems to have become inspirational and aspirational for others.

RJ: I guess that’s why you are so popular in so many kinds of ventures and entertainment venues. So you’re in Vegas in the 1980s. What’s the next incarnation or reinvention?

SS: When I was working at the Las Vegas Hilton, I was doing two live shows nightly; dinner and the midnight show; that schedule wears you down physically. I don’t care how young you are; the body gets tired. At the end of three years straight (six nights a week), I weighed 98 pounds. I usually weigh 127; this was not a good look for me, and I started looking like I could hang by my shoulders on a clothes hanger, so I said to Alan: “We’re going to have to find a way to make a living where I don’t have to ‘show up.’” Alan said: “Passive income.”

RJ: I guess you put it out there and something materialized?

SS: The universe has a way of working like that. We wanted passive income, and then one day the phone rang. A guy wanted to show us his product. He called it a V-Toner for the shoulders, but I took one look at it and asked: “Is this good for the thighs?” We named it the ThighMaster that day. (My husband recalls that he named it the ThighMaster; we disagree on this).

The ThighMaster sold over 10 million units, and is still selling to this day. Passive income. Allowed me to pick and choose and slow down a little. Allowed me to seriously devote my time to writing books, which became a driving force inside me.

Selling product was considered a chancy thing to do at that time. There was a snobbishness that celebrities didn’t do advertisements, that somehow it had a cheapening effect, tarnished the image. But I always understood the value of marketing.

I had originally gone to the producers of Three’s Company and suggested that we market my character. I did not own the rights to her, but I felt that her clothes, hairstyles, kneesocks, wedge shoes, and tight T-shirts were extremely marketable. I also felt that she would do well in feature films and a Saturday morning animated cartoon show. (I still do.) I mean it is, after all, “show business.”

ThighMaster was such a hit that the comedians picked
up on it, David Letterman had it in his Top Ten List regularly, same with Jay Leno, Phil Donahue, and even President Bush Sr. did jokes about it at a state dinner. The ThighMaster was as popular a brand as Kleenex, and it was synonymous with Suzanne Somers. Suddenly, branding as a celebrity became desirable, and people wanted to know how we had done this. I have to say the feeling was sweet.

RJ: Another first, another time you’re breaking new ground. This seems to be a recurring theme with you.

SS: Always saw things and opportunities that others didn’t see. Didn’t invent the ThighMaster but understood its potential; same thing with Chrissy: when I approached producers about making her a brand, they couldn’t see it.

RJ: Does everything you touch turn to gold?

SS: I wish; we have our flops. They are just not visible. We came up with great idea called the ButtMaster, which was actually a superb product, worked the entire gluteus maximus, but we didn’t factor in that no one wants to walk out of a Wal-Mart with a big box that says “ButtMaster” on it. Big miscalculation. But again, failure is not a problem for me. You have to try, and try and try again. Remember, for me, “The worst is over.”

RJ: I’ve had the great pleasure of having you cook a meal for me and Alan. I still am haunted by that meal.

SS: Right, you seemed to enjoy that ... let’s see; I made you shitake mushroom soup with crispy fried shallots and white truffle oil, homegrown just-picked heirloom tomatoes with fresh pesto, and turmeric chicken and creamy mashed potatoes. (I’m Irish, always looking for a way to have a potato.)

RJ: Well, you’re a phenomenal cook, or probably more like a world-class, cordon bleu chef. Tell me about how you got into cookbooks and the food thing.

SS: If things had gone according to my plan (you know that old saying, wanna make God laugh, tell her your plans!), I wanted to be a chef. My mother wasn’t a great cook, probably because she was so traumatized; she burned things, overcooked things; so, don’t know why but at age 5, I made beef Stroganoff, and it was good. Real good, and from then on I was the one who put the best meals on the table for our family. Cooking is a “feel” thing. I know how long to cook things and how to bring out flavor in foods. Always have, even in the beginning.

Right before I got the part on Three’s Company, I had it with all the rejection and humiliation of trying to be an actress in Hollywood and decided that I was going to teach cooking at my home and try to get a professional job at some restaurant. Then I got the part of Chrissy, which was life-changing.

On the diet books ... I’ve always been thin ... my nickname growing up was “Boney Mahoney,” so what a surprise that at 40ish, I started getting “thick.” “Thick” is not a good look. I didn’t realize it at first, but thick is that menopausal look ... hormones are off, out of whack.

Having a knack at understanding science, I understood the insulin connection to weight gain, and decided to eliminate everything the body accepts as sugar, not just cakes, pies, and cookies, but the white stuff: white flour, white rice, pasta, high-starch vegetables. I started eating a diet of real food, fresh food; vegetables and protein, with minimum fruit. Within a short period, I dropped 12 pounds.

I thought, hey, this is a good idea and wrote the first of my Somersize series, Eat Great, Lose Weight; and it became a sensation. Sold over 1 million books. No one was more surprised than me. Today there are 9 Somersize books and 10 million copies sold to date.

Somersizing was about eliminating sugar, but sugar was in everything, even mustard. People started writing me complaining that they were having a difficult time finding catsup, and products without hidden sugars. Demand ... solution! ... I started manufacturing quality foods and food mixes that were sugar free, created a 100% all-natural sweetener called SomerSweet, unique because it is unusual to find any sweetener without chemicals (FYI, artificial sweetener means chemicals), and the food business was born. Today we have over 1000 food products.

RJ: Where can people find out about your food products?


RJ: OK, we’ve got the diet and the selling food and health products down, but what’s the deal with all the jewelry and clothes? How did you get into that?

SS: It’s all aspirational. My demographics are women 40 to 90... but with a niche. These are all women who want to look and feel good. Want to stay in the game, don’t want to be put out to pasture, and don’t want to become invisible like the women before us. Those of us that have embraced this lifestyle and health regimen want to stay sexual and heightened

RJ: So what’s that got to do with clothing and jewelry?

SS: Everything. No one is focusing on this group ... except me. I make clothes and jewelry for women who are “hip, sexy, but not desperate.” These are the woman on hormone replacement, they have lost the weight, they have learned how to eat to stay fit and attractive, they exercise but are not fanatics, they enjoy life; and these women look great. They are happy, they like themselves, I like them. This is huge. I’ve done most of this part of the business on Home Shopping Network, but I’ve recently moved over to ShopNBC.

RJ: Do you do this by yourself?

SS: I have a great team, and it’s really a mom-and-pop business. My husband runs it. One of his many talents is monetizing my passions. My daughter, Leslie Hamel, is the fashion and jewelry designer (she graduated Parsons). My daughter-in-law, Caroline, runs the food business and is in charge of branding and the website. The website is phenomenally successful and always has a lot to offer and
Suzanne Somers

a lot of shopping. I oversee, approve, instigate ideas, and follow through; but my major role is out-front person. If I love it, I can sell it, I walk my talk, wear my fashions, eat my food, and use my FaceMaster (an amazing nonsurgical face-lift machine that has sold over a million units to date. I told you I can sell!)

RJ: OK, so now you’re a mogul in addition to a Vegas headliner. Is the next step back to TV with Step by Step?

SS: All in all, I spent 20 years in TV series. But nothing ever was as phenomenal as Three’s Company, which I did for five years. I spent seven years on Step by Step with Patrick Duffy (who I loved working with); three years as host of Candid Camera, which I liked because I got a new designer outfit each week (I know that’s shallow); three years on 8-Track Flashback for VH1; two years on She’s the Sheriff; and one year with my own talk show.

RJ: After that, you got into the serious health thing with bioidentical hormones? In your three books on the subject (Ageless, The Sexy Years, and Breakthrough) you wrote about how bioidentical hormone replacement therapy was your miracle cure to all your severe menopause symptoms.

SS: Yes, menopause was a huge problem for me, and bioidentical hormones gave me my life back. It was so life-changing, I couldn’t wait to tell other women about it. I think the hormone books and guiding people in the direction of health and healthy living is my true calling. And you know, things happen to you in life for a reason.

When I was diagnosed with breast cancer, it was devastating, but then it turned out to be a strange disguised gift which put me on a new path to health and changed my life for the better. Made me question how I had been living my life up to this point. I had to ask myself, what had I done to play host to this killer disease? Cancer is daunting, but you find out who you really are, because the decisions that need to be made are so serious. I knew, just knew, I wasn’t going to take the chemotherapy that was offered to me, even though it was considered a large tumor (2.4 cm). I did take radiation, a decision I’d have to think about today. There is so much negative information about radiation, but with what I knew at that time about balanced hormones, I truly felt that I could prevent a recurrence, my way, with nutrition, and bioidenticals. It was rather controversial even as recently as 9 years ago, yet information is now showing that balanced hormones keep our cancer-protective genes turned on. So maybe I knew something deep in my gut.

I find if you follow the flow of life, it takes you where you need to go. I look back and I see it’s all been perfect, everything I have done up until now has been preparation for this phase of my life. Three’s Company gave me the fame which I’ve used as a springboard; all the years of nightclubs (total of 25 and I’m still out there) have taught me to speak and kid around and be free with an audience. Gaining weight created a bonding with my female audience because I now had another problem ... just like them. Luckily, at that time I was already interested in nutrition and had an understanding of hormones from an insulin connection which became the basis of my Somersizing weight-loss program; and then, of course, menopause hit. Bad ... real bad. Lost me. Lost my fun. Lost my interest in everything that had excited me. And it made me mad. As women, we spend our lives taking care of everyone: nurturing, raising our children, doing the right thing, giving up our dreams in many cases so our families can stay intact; and then menopause hits and no one wants to be around you.

And our doctors didn’t get it. My doctors kept offering me sleeping pills and antidepressants and weight-loss pills, and valium for the anxiety, and this was just for starters. I realized that no one ... no one was taking care of women as we all hit middle age.

So I went after it. Figured it out. Discovered bioidentical hormones and found relief. Got my quality of life back. Got my sexuality back, and frankly better than ever ... I know, too much information, but women need to know this. And as women read my books, they got it. They went in droves to the few doctors who understood. Between the Women’s Health Initiative stopping its study because of an increased risk of cancer and heart disease caused by synthetic hormones, and my books about bioidentical hormones as a viable substitute, Wyeth’s blockbuster drug Premarin dropped by a whopping 72%. It was clear that the women were affecting big business’s bottom line by saying no to these drugs.

RJ: And you created the “Seven Dwarfs” thing?

SS: You mean “Itchy, Bitchy, Sleepy, Sweaty, Bloated, Forgetful, and All-Dried-Up”? That’s just life without hormones. Nice, huh? No wonder no one wants to be around us. We don’t want to be around us when we feel like that.

RJ: I’ve been involved in the area myself. Did you know that Dr. Gary London wrote a book called Thank you Suzanne Somers, in which he credits you for putting the whole field on the cultural map? He writes that you’re responsible for many women feeling better because they took your advice and started taking BHRT. That must make you feel good.

SS: Yes, this is all very gratifying; like it’s all been worth it, especially since I grew up with such low self-esteem. I feel that I finally deserve the little space I occupy on this planet. Like I’ve added something, and that feels very good. Women write me and stop me on the street or come up to me in restaurants and thank me. But really, it’s such a privilege to be this messenger.

One thing I can do is communicate. And I obviously have been able to communicate this message to my legions out there. They know they can trust me, they know I walk my talk, and they know I use my celebrity to get to the best and the brightest and then I pass it on, I share it.

RJ: Indeed you do that. So what’s your basic message about BHRT?
SS: That you can live to the new age of 90 or 100 (or more) with quality of life, strong bones, good working brain, memory intact, with energy and vitality, and (I’ll say it again) a vibrant sex drive, if you replace the hormones you have lost in the aging process (or through stress) with real natural bioidentical hormones.

That you can remain a productive member of society and not a drain on society.

That aging is a great experience, maybe the best part of life if you approach it this new way.

RJ: Sounds like the BHRT docs should be buying your books and giving them away to their patients and prospective patients.

SS: [laughs] That would be nice; I’ll be sure to tell my publisher about that.

RJ: So what’s next? Any more Suzanne reinventions?

SS: [laughing] You never know; I’ve surprised people in the past and hope to continue to do so. Of course, I want to continue and expand my reach as a spokesperson for the alternative-health movement and be someone who brings new treatments to the public's attention. I also feel as though I’m just getting my second wind, so I think there will be much more coming from me in the future. Stay tuned!

RJ: Ever think about running for public office?

SS: No; I’m nonpolitical. I have opinions but don’t express them in public. But I would like to continue and play an even greater role in the public debate about health care because, as you can tell, I have very strong beliefs about these issues.

RJ: So did I forget anything?

SS: Well, I grow my own organic food. I love my children and six grandchildren. Maybe that’s my real accomplishment. Successfully blending families is very difficult to achieve, and I’m proud that we all love each other so much.

My out-front life is at times larger than life. But my personal life, the “at-home” me, is quite normal ... I have normal problems to cope with and, like all women, I have days when I think I’m fat, some days I bloat, days when I get insecure. I need to be told I’m loved ... this is the stuff of life, and I believe it is common with all women.

I’m not able to see myself objectively. I know who lives inside, and I’m conscious of the flaws; but I have come a long way from where I started, and I give myself credit for that. I also know that if you are willing to do the work (and it’s agitating) ... that you can change your life.

RJ: So what does health guru/prophetess Somers see on the horizon?

SS: Well, I will continue to look for and take advantage of new cutting-edge health technologies, particularly when they are nondrug. I am a true believer in the future therapeutic use of stem cells, so I have banked my stem cells with NeoStem [go to www.suzannesomers and click on “NeoStem”]. For me personally, I am very interested in stem cell therapy for regrowing the part of my breast that was taken in surgery. We’re almost there with this technology, which is quite exciting. Think how great this will be for all the women in the world who have been disfigured due to breast cancer.

The other technology I am really interested in is nano patches [go to www.suzannesomers.com and click on “LifeWaves”], which I talked about in Knockout and Breakthrough. I wear these nondrug patches regularly for pain, or energy, or sleep. They are quite remarkable, and I feel that in the future this technology will be huge.

RJ: Suzanne, what aren’t you into?

SS: I just keep trying to expand my audience. I’m having a cruise in November. It’s a health cruise, featuring some of the doctors in my books. There will be hormone lectures that I will give along with the doctors, and there will be consultations; and I’m bringing my band and my Las Vegas show to entertain the group. Should be fun. It’s the maiden voyage of the Italian liner Poesia, and there will be great Italian food ... and a lot of good-looking Italian stewards, which should interest all the hormonally balanced ladies. You can find information on the cruise by going to my website. I’m trying to do this and have fun ... women have a herding instinct ... when they all get together on these cruises, they really let loose. My husband hides in the cabin most of the time. He says it’s scary to be around all that estrogen (ha, ha, ha).

RJ: That sounds like a fun and enriching trip.

Suzanne, Knockout is a terrific book. I know it will be a huge best-seller and it will have tremendous impact in the cancer world. I can’t think of anyone who deserves this success more than you.

SS: Thanks, Rick. As I said in Knockout’s acknowledgements, I truly appreciate the help and guidance you have given me. I hope I can call on you when the cancer establishment comes after me.

RJ: Me and the whole CAM community, for sure. Let the battles begin.

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