



Shannon Marshall Castro and her daughter, Cherokee, live close enough to Elon's campus to be able to pay visits to father and husband, Paul Castro, who teaches screenwriting and cinema production classes at the university. Shannon also takes spanish classes at El Centro at Elon.



A mom, a wife, an actress and a black belt

Shannon Marshall Castro plays many roles

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You'll rarely see Shannon Marshall Castro without her 19-month-year-old daughter, Cherokee, resting on her hip. But she hasn't assumed this stereotypical motherly task for long.

She just turned 40 this past year but most people assume she's much younger. Assumptions have landed her into some interesting situations in her career as an actress, ranging from amusing to devastating.

Once while she was shooting a commercial in a middle school, the school principal reprimanded her for being in the halls during class.

"I told him I was there with the shoot, and he didn't believe me," she said.

Castro is the wife of visiting professor of communications, Paul Castro. The two met while living in Los Angeles, got married, had Cherokee and earlier this year, relocated to North Carolina.

At 26, Castro worked as a waitress at the Broadway Deli, and Paul lived above the diner. Inevitably, the two became friends.

"We always had chemistry but we never acted on it because he was dating someone and lived with her above the diner," Castro said.

The two knew each other for a few years before anything romantic happened between them.

One day, Paul stopped into the diner to chat with Shannon at the hostess stand. At this point, Shannon knew that he and his former flame were no longer together. He told her he was about to go pack for a family trip to Maine. A few hours later, she saw him putting his bags into a car outside of the diner. He popped inside to say goodbye to someone, but Shannon didn't think it would be her.

Castro didn't expect that her feelings for Paul would be reciprocated.

"He came in and said he wanted to say goodbye to an amazing girl," she said. "So I looked around, wondering who he was talking about. Then he kissed me and he left."

While Paul was gone, she broke her ankle and was unable to work at the diner for three months. In July, she returned to the diner and ran into Paul. He asked her to get a drink after work, and she agreed.

"I told my roommate about him and that I thought he was just a player," Castro said.

They went to a bar, and Paul apologized for the kiss, saying that he thought she didn't like it. Shannon told him that she was surprised, but she didn't dislike the gesture. Shannon was supposed to go out with friends that night, and she convinced Paul to tag along.

"He kissed me on the dance floor, and

I thought, 'OK, this is going well,'" she said.

The following day, a co-worker informed Shannon that Paul had dropped by and said that he would be back later. At the end of her shift, Shannon got into her car and found a card from Paul that read: "Shannon, you are to earth what angels are to heaven." He included his phone number in the card as well.

Paul's charm worked, because Shannon called him a few days later after a rehearsal.

"We went out on our first date on July 5, 1999" she said. "And he kept bringing up the flowers. He asked why I never thanked him for the flowers."

To her knowledge Shannon had never received flowers from Paul.

But it turns out that someone broke into her car, left the card but stole the roses he got her to go with it.

"Luckily they didn't steal the car, and they just stole the roses," she said. "Or else I never would have called him or known he had gotten me anything."

The couple has been together ever since. They were married in September 2002 and gave birth to a baby girl on July 28, 2009. Soon after they had Cherokee, they picked up and moved to North Carolina.

"I never thought I would leave LA," Castro admitted. "I'm a California girl. I lived there for 18 years."

She made the move from Washington, D.C. to Los Angeles in 1992, right after she graduated from Howard University with a degree in marketing. She put those skills to use working for a computer company in Los Angeles.

"My major was marketing, but I always had acting in the back of my mind," she said.

She always felt that she would end up in Los Angeles at some point. Her sister and her boyfriend at the time were both there, which gave her reason to relocate.

"I used to joke that my 'real' mother lived in California," she laughed. "And my mom would say, 'Well, I wish she would come get you, because I'm tired of footing all your bills.'"

Castro grew up in Annapolis, Maryland with two brothers and one sister. She was also fortunate enough to grow up in a great community in a great neighborhood, she said. As a child, she did some modeling and a lot of theater. It was the first kind of acting she got into. She and her mother are extremely close, she said. Her mother supported her decision to move out west.

"At that point, I thought I was going to be a big CEO of a company," Castro said.

"But I found out that I hated working in an office."

She started attending acting classes and took up photography.

"I knew I'd hate myself if I didn't try it," she said of her new, more artistic endeavors.

It worked out, because she landed her first commercial with Domino's Pizza, and the connections she made got her into the Screen Actor's Guild effortlessly. Castro learned that she enjoyed on-screen acting, but theater would always be her first love.

"It's so rewarding because it's instant," she said. "It's instant gratification. And if you mess up, you just keep going."

Castro has learned a lot about messing up and carrying on in her career.

"Acting is always up and down, up and down," she said.

Castro spent years in LA taking classes and going to auditions. Finally, she got her first big role in 2000 on the Disney Channel show, "Even Stevens." Castro was 29 years old at the time, and she was playing a 15-year-old girl.

She loved working on the show, and she was excited for every day on set. Her time was cut short, though, right before the show went on a hiatus. The makeup artist found out Castro was 29. The

entire cast and crew thought she was younger.

"Once everyone else found out, they said I was just too old for it," she said.

She was never called back, and she wasn't surprised. She learned a lot about the industry from her experience working with Disney.

"They see you in a box," she said. "And you can't let them see you outside of that box."

Castro said she believes that when casting directors and other people in the acting world see you outside of the box, things get messy and real.

She shouldn't have told them, and she took it out on herself. She was upset for a year, and it showed.

"I wasn't getting any parts because I was desperate and casting directors could sense that," she said.

Castro knew she had to take responsibility for herself and pick herself up after falling down.

She got that pick-me-up in 2003, when she auditioned for a role on "The West Wing." Paul intercepted a voicemail from her agent informing her of an audition she had in two hours. Paul quickly got a hold of Shannon and she ran home to change and make it to her audition on

time. She showed up to the audition a little frazzled, but she still landed the part. The director even let her redo the one line she had to deliver for the audition, which she butchered on the first try.

"I screwed up the line, then just started laughing," she said. "I was like, 'That was really bad, wasn't it?' and (the casting director) agreed."

Castro thought there was no way she would get a call back, but she did. She was so excited to land a bigger part. After two episodes with what she called a fun and exhilarating cast, another hiatus came up.

"Me and hiatuses don't really seem to work out," she laughed.

Again, the situation was out of her control. Castro was supposed to do nine episodes with "The West Wing," but right before the show went on hiatus, executive producer Aaron Sorkin's career was plagued by drug use. He quit the show and Castro was never called back after her first two episodes.

Because her experience with "The West Wing" mirrored that of "Even Stevens," Castro was out of luck.

"Both were big shows and I got on board right before the shows went on hiatus," she said. "So I couldn't capitalize on being on the shows like I really wanted to once they were over for the summer."

Castro has yet to land a bigger gig than "Even Stevens" or "The West Wing," but she fills her time with other things that she is passionate about.

"My two passions are Krav Maga and acting," she said. "Besides my little baby and Paul, of course."

Krav Maga is Israeli army self defense. Castro is one of seven female black belts in the United States, of about 80 total in the country.

"I took a class one time in 2001 and I just became addicted to it," she said. "And I was asked to be an instructor in LA."

Luckily when Castro moved to North Carolina, she was able to keep up with her training. She found a Krav Maga studio in Charlotte where she teaches classes two or three times a week. Castro wants to start teaching classes at Elon.

"I think it's really important for women to learn how to defend themselves," she said.

As far as acting in North Carolina, Castro is still trying to catch her break. There is a surprisingly big market here, she said, especially in Charlotte. Right now, she is just looking and waiting for an audition.

Incidentally, her agent in LA called her just as they were settling into North Carolina.

"He said I'll always have him in LA to help me out, so I can call him if I ever end up back out there, which is one more thing I'm thankful for," she said.