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## Mother Knows Best

MOMbo queen Nanci Oleson puts parenting into perspective with a new CD

By Maria Rubinstein

Imagine this exchange on your kid’s playground:

“My mom’s a doctor.”

“My mom’s a firefighter.”

“My mom drives a backhoe.”

“Yeah? Well, my mom’s a stiltwalker.”

“Oooooo,” all the other kids say. On the scale of parental coolness, they all know who’s the winner: the stilt-walking mom. Who could be cooler than that?

And there’s no doubt about it, Nanci Oleson is cool. Tall and thin, sporting a cute haircut, Oleson exudes a kind of zestful tranquility. She seems completely present, completely at home with herself and her life with her husband of 20 years, Steve Epp of Theatre de la Jeune Lune, and their three children, now aged 14, 11, and 10.

And, thanks to her KFAI radio show *MOMbo: A Mom Show with an Attitude*, a lot of us are at home with Oleson and with her life as a mom. From May 1991 (when Oleson’s oldest child was not quite 1) until September 2002 (with her youngest child just about 7), Oleson came into the studios at KFAI every week and told us about her own parental struggles and achievements. She brought us interviews with such visionaries as Ariel Gore, founder of *HipMama* magazine, and Dr. Harriet Lerner, author of *The Mother*

*Dance*. She invited everyday moms to join her on the air to talk about everything from whether your kid should have a pet to giving birth to a stillborn child. She took us dogsledding with her kids in Canada. She let us listen in while she baked bread in her south Minneapolis home. Every week, she said, “Love your kids. Be good to yourself.”

Oleson may have left the air, but she’s remained committed to celebrating parenthood. On April 11, she will release *Now You MOMbo*, a four-CD set of recordings targeted to “the new mom.” The CDs, which come with a companion booklet, include interviews, conversations, and music about topics such as pregnancy, school, work, and that ever-popular topic whenever new moms get together: sleep.

### A Show About What Gets Left Behind

Oleson was no stranger to radio when she started *MOMbo*. She had been producing *Artifacts* at KFAI and she’d completed an internship at Minnesota Public Radio. Meanwhile, trained as an actor, she continued her work with Heart of the Beast and other theaters around town.

Then one night, she was in her car with her oldest son, who was still an

infant. “It was late and I was driving home in a thunderstorm and using my finger for my son to suck on,” she remembers, “and I realized that I was doing more than I wanted to be doing, that it seemed as though motherhood was just another project—first you do this, and then you do this. I didn’t realize until that moment it was as big, as life changing as it is. I didn’t want to do a show about art,” she continues “but about what I was leaving behind to do that show about art.”

Oleson pitched the idea to KFAI, which picked it up. Eventually, so did the Pacifica Network, bringing the show to moms across the country.

Minneapolis mom Theresa Jarosz Alberti remembers listening to Oleson on the radio when her kids were in preschool (about 10 years ago). “I really enjoyed Nanci’s perspective on parenting,” she says. “She has such an accepting point of view.”

Alberti remembers reading parenting magazines when her kids were little that “tell you how to do everything right. Everything has to be perfect.” But, Alberti says, “Nanci would come on and talk about how tired she was, how hard and yet how rewarding it was to be a parent.”

Alberti enjoyed Oleson’s show so much that she even tried the craft projects. “She had a show where she talked about melting down chocolate chips and adding corn syrup. We tried it. It was fun, and simple.” So Alberti e-mailed Oleson, who invited Alberti to the studio to be part of “a panel of mothers,” says Alberti. “We talked about basic mom issues.”

Like many moms, Alberti is “so impressed” that Oleson could do all the work involved with producing and

hosting *MOMbo*. “How does she do it?” Alberti asks.

Oleson laughs when she hears comments like this. “I’ve always had a lot of energy,” she acknowledges, but she does admit that producing *MOMbo* was a lot of work, and says that she’s “put in a lot of late nights.” She’s also done a lot of child-care swapping with friends—or, as she describes it, “child sharing.” Finally, when she had to, she took her kids into the studio with her. Her youngest “refused to take a bottle, so I’d nurse her in the studio while I was doing the live show.”

Then, in September 2002, Oleson gave up her weekly radio gig. “I never made a cent,” she says, adding that she could no longer afford (both financially and emotionally) to keep it going. “I felt as though I was sneaking time and money and resources away from my family.”

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Leaving the show, however, didn’t mean Oleson was abandoning her calling as a one-mom support system. After signing off, she produced *A MOMbo New Year* and, about a year later, *A MOMbo Mother’s Day*. Meanwhile, she was working on her Web site and making plans for *Now You MOMbo*.

### Making Time for Kids

Nowadays, between periods of getting organized for the release of *Now You MOMbo*, Oleson is still busy, putting in long days on the million and one details that make up putting out an ambitious CD project, working as a waitress, trying to have supper (or at least breakfast) with her husband and her kids. She does most of the cooking (“We use the crockpot a lot”) and sees her own mother, who recently moved to Minneapolis, “quite a bit.” She recently took up piano lessons again, and tries to exercise daily. She’s working on new challenges as a parent. (“Now that my children are older,” she says, “they’re approaching the age where I embarrass them.”) Through it all, she says, “I try to make time for them every day.”

And it is Oleson’s hope that she’ll continue to be busy. “I’d like to do the radio show again,” she says wistfully. “I would like *MOMbo* to be more stable.”

A lot of moms would like that, too. **MO**



**Now You MOMbo Release Party**  
**Sunday, April 17, 4–6 p.m.**  
**Lake of the Isles Lutheran Church**  
**2020 West Lake of the Isles Parkway, Minneapolis**

**The Now You MOMbo release party will include readings and music by artists featured on Now You MOMbo, including Nanci Oleson, commentator/fiddler/mother Linda Breitag, and professor/playwright/mother Darcey Engen. The performance will be followed by a CD signing and discussion with Oleson. For more information, visit [www.mombo.org](http://www.mombo.org)**