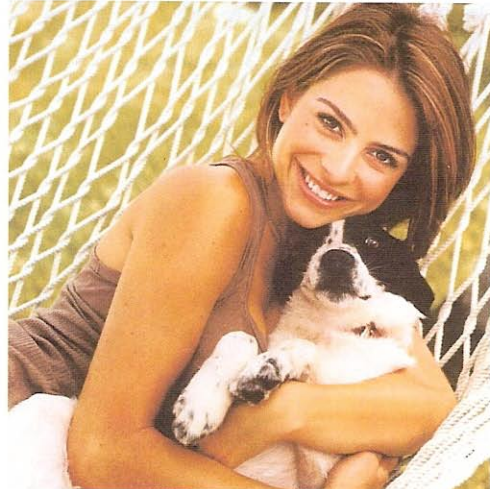
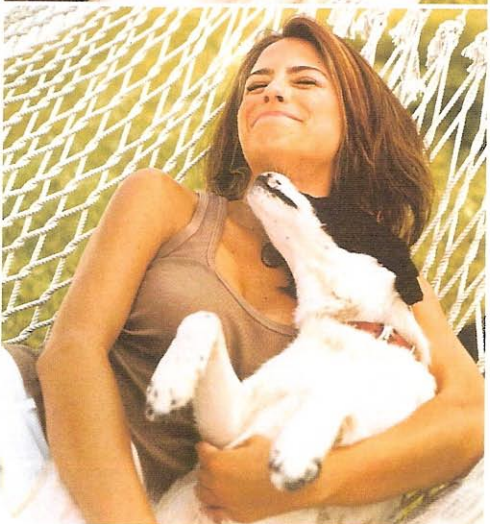
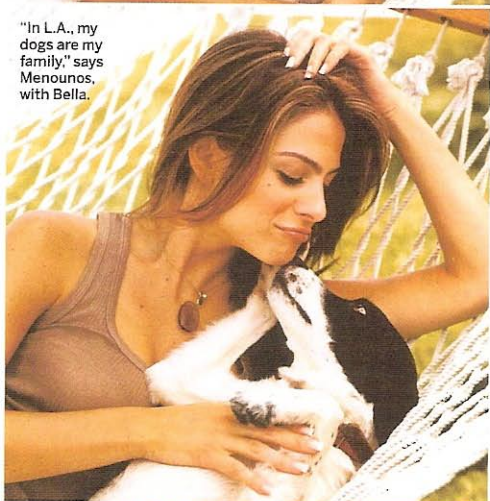


Maria Menounos is self-reliant

This glam *Entertainment Tonight* correspondent, 26, walks the red carpet but keeps her feet firmly on the ground. Interview by Shelley Levitt



"In L.A., my dogs are my family," says Menounos, with Bella.



My parents, Greek immigrants, used to work as janitors in Boston nightclubs. They couldn't afford babysitters, so they often brought my brother and me along from the time I was 3 until I got my working papers at 13. The clubs were enormous; I'd wear roller skates and see how fast I could get all the trash in the barrels. We'd come home in the evening, our station wagon filled with cans we'd collected for extra cash, and I'd be mortified if one of my friends happened to see us. Those days gave me a sense of humility I've never lost.

I've never believed you have to do one thing. I've worked as a perfume spritzer in a department store and as a street vendor selling sausage, and in 2001, I helped direct and produce a documentary on the AIDS epidemic in South Africa. I then used the last of my savings to create Take Action Hollywood!, a nonprofit that funds films that raise awareness about issues such as AIDS and the Holocaust. Tackling serious topics is quite a contrast to interviewing celebrities for *ET* and getting to wear a \$2.5 million diamond-covered gown on the red carpet. But to me, life without variety would be a bore.

I gained 40 pounds during my first two years at Emerson College in Boston. My dad is diabetic, and we'd always eaten healthy at home. So it was a change for me to be able to scarf down cheesesteaks and pizza at 2 A.M. I even competed with the football players to see who could eat more. I think I felt that if there was ever a time I could be chunky, college was it. When I decided to deal with my weight during my junior year, I briefly tried a few weird diets, like eating mostly cabbage or drinking lots of black coffee. What eventually worked for me was cutting back on portions. I continued to eat Oreos—I still do. But I'd limit myself to three and write down everything I consumed. Today, I feel really comfortable with how I look.

Watching myself for the first time on *Entertainment Tonight* was such an amazing moment. The thing that made it seem so unbelievable is that when I was 17, I was in the Miss Teen USA pageant, and [*ET* colleague] Bob Goen was hosting the competition. When he asked me what I wanted to do when I got older, I said, "I want to work with you at *ET*." Four years later, I was at his doorstep, saying, "Hi, I'm here!"

Maria Menounos