



# The Crown Jewel

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## ALL HAIL KEY WEST'S QUEEN MOTHER RONNIE CARRUTHERS

**W**hen Ronnie Carruthers quit his first job in Key West, cleaning rooms at The Reach Resort, he told his supervisor he was leaving to become a rock star.

"She laughed, but the next time she saw me I was on stage," said Carruthers. Three decades and a laundry list of international appearances later (he recently performed at Highclere Castle, aka "Downton Abbey"), Carruthers isn't just a rock star, he's Key West royalty.

Carruthers stole the show — and earned the crown — during last month's Queen Mother Pageant, with his blistering live performance of "You Came a Long Way From St. Louis." His song choice was inspired in part by his own journey to Key West. "It's a story about finding your place. It took me a long time to get here, I've done a lot of things and I've still got a long way to go," said Carruthers. "It was a reminder to myself that there's still more to be done."

On Carruthers' to-do list is using his newfound Queen Mother platform to bring attention to arts education. Carruthers credits a high school drama teacher with exposing him to the arts. "If I didn't have my mother's support or my teacher Denise Caplan, I would have never been an artist, I would have never been Vanna Black, I would never be in Key West," he said. "You have to have somebody that believes in you and nurtures you. You can't express yourself freely if there's no one supporting you."

Carruthers, who counts Diana Ross as his favorite queen, grew up the youngest of five brothers on a farm outside of Memphis, Tenn. He attended the Memphis College of Art, concentrating on painting and theatrical design. His career as a singer began by accident while working as a set designer on a production of "Guys and Dolls." When the

lead fell ill, Carruthers stepped in. "I never took any of it seriously until I heard the applause." After that positive reaction, Carruthers began singing in drag to offset the expense of his education. He later took to designing head-dresses for the stage, traveling to Florence, Italy to observe master craftsmen at work.

Music brought Carruthers to Key West in the early '90s, when he performed at the iconic Copa Club and recorded demos in the attic of an underground dance house on Fleming Street. The demos led to a recording contract and the release of his single, "Black Sunshine." Citing Nina Simone as a primary influence, Carruthers said, "I tell a story through song. I don't worry about how I sound or what note it is, it's what feeling I get."

Carruthers is also an accomplished visual artist. His paintings have been exhibited locally at Gallery on Green. He describes his style as a hybrid of abstract expressionism and realism. "It's a duality, similar to drag. I sometimes marry the two with collage. I'm a little bit of everything."

During his tenure on the island, Carruthers has earned numerous awards and accolades including Mr. Pride and Miss Key West. Carruthers now limits his drag performances to once a year, preferring the pace, and footwear, of singing alongside Stachaa Ortiz as part of the group 3SUM. "I spent almost 15 years of my life in high heel shoes and glamorous makeup. It's a different thing for me now," he said.

Carruthers performs at the Piano Bar at La Te Da Thursday through Sunday with 3SUM and solo on Mondays. All shows are at 8:30 p.m.



**Full Name? Nickname?** Ronnie Carruthers, Vanna Black

**What is your astrological sign and do you subscribe to it?** Capricorn. My rising sign is Aries, moon in Scorpio. I'm hard on myself, and I'm hard on my friends. I don't walk on people, and I don't want anything I didn't earn.

**Do you have a life credo or motto?** "Don't live your life like you've got another one in the glove compartment."

**When did you realize you could sing?** I grew up very religious. I used to have to sneak to listen to Casey Kasem's Top 40, and I was a parrot. My mom would say "turn off the radio," and it would be me singing.

**What's on your bucket list?** I would love to see Japan. I'm intrigued by geishas. Everything they do is a dance. It's art.

**What is your idea of perfect happiness?** I don't believe there's any such thing; you've got to make the most of what you got right now and go global.

**What is it that you most dislike?** Complacency. The earth is constantly moving, we're not standing still, why are you?

**Which TV, movie or superhero character is your alter ego?** Wonder Woman. She had everything: a beautiful island, a magic jet, a tiara, but she left it all because she knew the world needed her, and she had more to give.

**What would your last meal be and who would cook it?** Something from El Siboney. They make the best black beans and yellow rice ever. It reminds me of my Mom's food.

**Name 3 things you could not live without?** Family. Friends. Art.

**If invisible what would you do?** I would go and fix Donald Trump's hair. There is no excuse. Somebody doesn't like him to let him go this long like that. He makes nice ties, but the hair has got to go. I'd shave it and make him start over, make him grow a beard.

**On what occasion do you lie?** If I know it is going to hurt someone unnecessarily. Some people can't handle the truth, and I know the ones that can't.

**Favorite guilty pleasure?** Cheetos in bed and "Outlander."

**What talent would you secretly love to have?** I'd love to be able to play the piano. I have so much to say, and it seems like people that have that can never be sad because they can let it out.

**If you were to die and come back as a person or a thing, who or what would it be?** I would come back as a black cat with green eyes that lives in Paris with a rich gay couple who would brush my fur regularly and buy me nice chokers. I would sit in the window and watch the people on the Champs-Élysées go by.

**Lunch with one famous person, whom would you choose?** Bette Midler. She's fun but she's a serious bitch and she doesn't bite her tongue about anything. Or Daniel Craig ... and you know why.

**Finish these sentences...**

**My friends and family would describe me as...** A little bit silly, hardworking, determined, loyal to a fault and kind.

**My autobiography would be titled...** "Vanna Black: Breaker of Chains, Mother of Drag Queens."

**I can never refuse...** jewelry.

**When I go, I will go...** back to stardust.



Jace Thompson of First State Bank, left, Anna Marie Haskins of Monroe County Social Services, Margo Thompson of Monroe County Clerk's Office, and Christela Brevil of Monroe County Florida Department of Health prepare picnic themed food for delivery to homebound Florida Keys residents on July 4. CONTRIBUTED

## VOLUNTEERS DELIVER PICNICS ON 4TH

Anna Marie Haskins, special projects coordinator for Monroe County Social Services, volunteered her time on July 4 to share prepared meals with homebound Florida Keys residents. She, along with Jace Thompson, Margo Thompson, and Christela Brevil, spent the day assembling and delivering picnic-themed meals to 20 people.

Several agencies, including the Monroe County Clerk's Office and Monroe County Florida Department of Health, donated time and items for the deliveries.

"It really makes their day, and ours," said Haskins, who has been doing this for about 8 or 9 years. She volunteers thinking of her grandmother during the holidays and how much a short visit brightens someone's day who is homebound.

The Independence Day picnics included hot dogs and hamburgers, chips, carrots with ranch dressing, coleslaw, baked beans, and a red, white, and blue dessert. The package also came with a pinwheel and two handwritten cards. Key West High School volunteer Lauryn Bochenick prepared the handmade cards and helped pick up donations. Her volunteer hours will count toward her community service hours for her high school and college programs.

Haskins coordinates deliveries for all county-closed holidays, including Thanksgiving and Christmas. To volunteer, call 305-797-5389 or email [haskins-anna@monroecounty-fl.gov](mailto:haskins-anna@monroecounty-fl.gov).

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