

The shampoo billionaire

John Paul DeJoria used to live in his car. Now he has a Malibu mansion, a Playboy model wife and £2.5 billion in the bank. And all because you don't want dandruff

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John Paul DeJoria has not travelled far in life, at least not physically. Today, he lives just a few miles from the rundown corner of Los Angeles where he grew up in a foster home. Nearby is the gas station where he slept in his car as a homeless person, collecting empty Coke bottles to cash in at the supermarket.

These days, however, he lives in an exquisite Mediterranean villa set in the hills of Malibu, overlooking the Pacific. *Forbes* magazine lists him as the 65th richest American with a net worth of £2.5 billion. The secret to his fortune? “Shampoo,” he says, himself incredulous. “Who’d have known?”

DeJoria epitomises the American Dream: a self-made man who by dint of sheer hard work and determination has climbed to the very top. He is the man behind Paul Mitchell shampoo, whose face – if not his name – is familiar from the stunning Paul Mitchell advertisements in glossy magazines. Shot by the likes of Annie Leibovitz and the late Richard Avedon, they depict DeJoria with his glamorous wife, Eloise – a former *Playboy* model – and golden-haired son John Anthony, now 13, set against the rugged California coast or in the African plains.

When DeJoria, 67, pads into his palatial living room in bare feet – wearing a black T-shirt and jeans, his long hair tied back in a ponytail, a few days’ stubble on his chin – my first thought is that if you took him out of this setting, you might still mistake him for a homeless person. No one seems to enjoy the irony more than him. “They were some pretty hard times,” he says with a short staccato laugh. “But I don’t want to lose touch with the person I was then.”

He takes me out on to the veranda, which overlooks the sea between pillars wrapped in plaited vines, and sweeps a hand over the lush garden and view beyond. “I wouldn’t be living here today if I’d had everything handed to me. I was having dinner with Clint [Eastwood] last night – he’s a pal of ours – and we both think that kids have it too easy these days. You need to struggle to get somewhere.”

I have heard that he has paintings by Old Masters, but he looks embarrassed when I ask who painted the portrait over the fireplace of a bearded man playing a lyre. “It’s just a nice old painting,” is all he will say. At a guess, I would say it is a Rembrandt.

The house – one of several that the DeJorias own throughout the USA – has a semi-ecclesiastical feel, with stained-glass windows ascending the sweeping staircase and religious panels from Russia on the walls. “I built this house from the ground up,” says DeJoria with real pride. It seems an apt metaphor for his life. Most of the elements

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Previous pages: John Paul DeJoria with his wife and son. Above: with Nelson Mandela. Below: his home

of the house, he says, were either built to replicate the Renaissance period or come from Italy, Greece and France. “The floor you walked in on is 2,000 years old. It comes from a Roman palace that was being dismantled. I had to fly in a team of floor-layers from Rome who stayed here for two months.” He is equally proud of the antiquity of the brick he used. “It had old Roman numerals that proved it came from Julius Caesar’s garrison. I paid a lot of money for it.”

No expense spared, in other words. DeJoria clearly enjoys his wealth and has a West Coast knack for displaying it. However, it would be wrong to imagine that he comes across as a swaggering billionaire. Far from it. Unassuming and courteous, he has an air of reserve about him. Over lunch, prepared by his personal chef, he is happy to let his wife do most of the talking.

DeJoria is almost as well known for his philanthropy as for his wealth. He lives by the motto “Success unshared is total failure” and showers money on a host of causes from eradicating landmines to disabling Japanese whaling ships and helping Appalachian coal miners become self-sufficient. Nor does he just sit at home writing cheques. He spent a week on board a ship dodging icebergs to protect baby harp seals and travelled to Mozambique to help people who had lost their legs to landmines. Last year, he galvanised all of his salons into sending hair clippings to make booms to help soak up oil in the Gulf. “Hair absorbs oil fast. Did it clean up the whole oil spill? No, we don’t have enough hair. But it made a contribution.”



Eloise describes how, when she first met DeJoria on a blind date, she thought he was too good to be true. "I had just come out of a relationship that was so mean and negative. At first I didn't think John Paul was real. I kept thinking no one could be that positive, but he really is set up like that. He's one of those rare seeds that survived a really tough upbringing."

"I was a happy kid. We didn't know that we were without," interjects DeJoria. "We always ate a good meal and maybe we didn't have a wardrobe of clothes, but we always had at least a change of clothes." He scarcely remembers his father, an Italian diesel mechanic who left his Greek mother when John Paul was 2. Eloise brings down a framed photograph of DeJoria's father. Tall and gangly, he is lolling against a wall with a pipe in his mouth. At the bottom is a message written to John Paul's mother: "To my sweetheart, my every thought is of you, I love and adore you."

"Isn't that so romantic?" says Eloise. "He sounds a lot like John Paul." She describes how DeJoria sent her 1,301 roses to accompany his proposal of a wedding date. "Thirteen is a lucky number for us," explains DeJoria. "We were both born on the 13th and we are 13 years apart in age. I thought, I won't send her 13 roses or 113, I'll send her 1,301."

"I was all dressed up to go to an aerobic class and I opened the door of my apartment and there was a truckload of flowers," recalls Eloise. "Then a second truck pulled up. My apartment was completely swamped and I closed all the shades. I was thinking: 'Gosh, I should sell these. I could get \$3 per rose.'"

They married a few months later, with The Who ["Roger Daltrey is a dear friend"] and Cher singing at their wedding. The couple already had five children between them from previous marriages and now they have John Anthony too. "You can see our wedding on the ceiling," says Eloise. I look up. Sure enough the whole ceiling is covered in a huge painting of John Paul and Eloise looking over a balustrade, surrounded by their families. DeJoria – who still seems scarcely able to believe how his life has turned out – comments that his mother's whole house would have fitted into this one room.

As a child, DeJoria lived with his mother at weekends only. Unable to afford childcare, she put him and his brother in foster care during the week while she went to work making hats. DeJoria roamed the streets with an East LA gang and, not surprisingly, did not shine at school. "In 11th grade, my business teacher caught me passing notes back and forth with Michelle Gilliam [who as Michelle Phillips went on to become one of the Mamas and the Papas]. He said: 'Johnny DeJoria and Michelle Gilliam will amount to absolutely nothing in life. They shouldn't be in this class. Do not

hang out with them.' On my 50th birthday, Michelle found Mr Wachs and brought him to my party in Malibu and reminded him of who we were and what we do now. He took it in good part."

After school, DeJoria joined the Navy for two years, then back home drifted from job to job, working as an encyclopaedia salesman, tow-truck driver, janitor and assistant in a dry-cleaning company. He married young, but his wife ran off after a couple of years, cleaning out their bank account and leaving him with their two-year-old son and a note saying: "I can't handle motherhood."

Soon afterwards, he was evicted from his home. Too proud to ask for help from friends or family, he moved into a broken-down Cadillac with his son and collected soda bottles to make ends meet. "We'd get two cents for a small one and five cents for a large one." He took odd jobs and eventually was offered a lowly marketing role at *Time* magazine, progressing from there to becoming the Los Angeles circulation manager. But he

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didn't feel he had found his true calling until, in 1971, he landed a position at Redken hair products on a starting salary of \$650 a month.

That same year he met Paul Mitchell at a hair show. The two became friends, and in 1980 they decided to set up a hair products business together. Between the two of them they scraped together \$700 to start the business. At the time DeJoria was homeless again, having split up with his second wife and left her and their daughter, Alexis (now a racing car driver), the house. "I slept in my car for two weeks until a kind lady knocked on my window and offered me a room."

The first two years were very tough. Mitchell and DeJoria's "office" consisted of a PO Box mailing address and a \$29 answering machine. "We went door-to-door trying to sell our shampoo, but it took two years to turn a profit." Money was so tight that they couldn't afford coloured ink, hence the famous black and white packaging of their shampoo bottles. "People ask me: 'When did you know you'd made it?' It was in 1982 when we had \$2,000 in the bank. We could finally pay the bills on time and stop pretending the cheque was in the mail. Our dream was to

make a couple of hundred thousand dollars each and we'd have the rest of our lives made. We had no idea it would get as big as this."

John Paul Mitchell Systems is the largest privately held beauty company in the world, with more than 100 products, available in 85 countries, with an annual revenue of £635 million. It prides itself on being the first beauty company to stand up against animal testing and only sells its products through professional salons. One of its latest products is Awapuhi Wild Ginger Shampoo, the formula for which is a closely guarded secret. "It's the biggest breakthrough ever in hair treatment," says DeJoria messianically. "It rebuilds the hair from the inside out."

Mitchell died in 1989 from pancreatic cancer and DeJoria has run the company ever since. In 1992 he also co-founded Patrón Spirits, which, if anything, is even more successful than JPMS. "We make the No 1 ultra-premium tequila in the world," says DeJoria proudly. "So now we can make people feel good as well as look good." He has several other business ventures, including John Paul Pet, which does hair and personal grooming for animals, and DeJoria Diamonds, a non-conflict diamond company in Sierra Leone that gives profits back to the local people.

DeJoria says that he inherits his instinct for sharing his money from his mother. "When I was about 6, she took my brother and me to downtown LA at Christmas to look at the decorations. She gave us each 10 cents and told us to put it in the bucket of a homeless man ringing a bell. It seemed like a lot of money, so we asked her why. She said: 'In life there's always someone who needs it more than you do. Even though we don't have a lot, we have enough to share at Christmas time.'"

After lunch, Eloise persuades me to accompany her on a walk up through the Malibu hills. On the way, she points out the neighbours' houses: large secluded mansions set in beautiful grounds amid palm trees. "Matthew Perry lives on our street and Britney Spears used to live down there. Mel Gibson's ex-wife, Robyn, lives here. Oh and there goes Dick," she says, waving to a passing car. Dick Van Dyke, apparently. The DeJorias clearly enjoy being at the heart of the celebrity circuit. Later that week, they are hosting a party at their house for the singer-songwriter, Margo Rey. "You must come," urges DeJoria. "It will be a star-studded event."

But DeJoria is canny enough to realise that success is not just about wealth and celebrity friends. "The real secret of success isn't how much money you have. Success is how well you do what you do. When I was a janitor, I swept the floors real good and made sure I was the best janitor in the world. Now it's no different: I just make sure I make the best shampoo in the world." ■