

Soledad O'Brien Rising

We've always liked

Soledad O'Brien. Now we know why:

She's smart and unflappable, even during an interview with four kids interrupting.

BY LAUREN PAIGE KENNEDY

It's nearly one o'clock in the afternoon. In a mere four minutes, I'm scheduled to turn the tables on world-renowned journalist Soledad O'Brien of CNN and interview the news giant famed for her *In America* documentaries, disaster aftermath reportage and sharp political insight.

q&a

Except for one small problem: My 3-year-old, who always, *always* takes her nap at noon and never wakes up during it, has just yelled out *Mommy!* from her bedroom upstairs. I race up the steps, calm and kiss her and then quietly close her door. As I do, fingers crossed, I hear my cell phone trilling from my den.

Who's on the other line, calling promptly as scheduled? O'Brien, of course.

Except, *wait*. She's not talking to *me* on the other end of the phone. She's talking to *her* kids. "I'm sorry," she apologizes to me the moment I say hello. "Hang on a sec—" I can hear several boys in the background, to whom she sweetly instructs where to find a hidden cache of lollipops. "Look really hard," she tells them. "And, boys? *Take your time!*"

O'Brien, 44, knows a thing or two about multitasking as one of America's most-watched talking heads, globe-trotting journalists and famous moms. She and her husband, Bradley Raymond, have four kids: Sofia Elizabeth, 9; Cecelia, 8; and twin boys, Charlie and Jackson, 6. "I'm your girl for children in the background," she says with a laugh. "It's the story of my life! In fact, at one point my girls would get on the phone while I was talking to, say, governors, and invite them to their birthday parties..."

Phew. With the lollipop hunt off and running, and a preschooler beautifully silent upstairs, what follows can only be described as a Q&A, *Mami a Mami*:

WF: You're set to host the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute's annual awards gala in September, which celebrates Latino leaders in America. Is this your first time hosting?

SO: This is my first time hosting. I'm excited, but I do not open with a joke! The beauty of getting old is you learn your skill set. My strength is that the show is going to run on time. It's going to be a very tight show.

WF: As someone who's also been recognized by African-American organizations and celebrated as an Irish-American, too, do you feel you embody the American dream, the melting pot?

SO: It's a joy to be claimed by so many people. And to be able to have my work reflect that sometimes is terrific, too. I'm a

first-generation American. Both my parents are foreigners to this country. As a seventh-grader, I first realized, *Hey! We're talking about people who came to the shores of America—those are my parents. I get it.* I guess I do feel like I'm a metaphor for the melting pot. My mom comes from Cuba, very poor, but had access to education. I come from a middle-class family, but my parents were obsessed with education. And, yes, my siblings and I all went to Harvard.

WF: Your newly formed *In America* unit on CNN tells stories from perspectives that are under-represented. Is the media simply ignoring swaths of social and economic experience?

SO: Some stories don't get a lot of play. Some of that is because documentaries are expensive to produce. Reality TV is less expensive to produce. You have to camp out, do the research, dig in and tell the story. I can't speak to why others don't [do this], but I try to focus on the stories that *aren't* told, or told well. I feel like I could be employed for the rest of my life, because there are *zillions* of stories out there to tell.

WF: When you set out to shed light on a racial and cultural experience, how do you get it both accurate and right?

SO: I think you have to talk to a lot of people. There are no groups completely homogeneous...one character doesn't accurately describe the group. The next *Black in America* is about one pastor in Somerset, N.J. It's not a survey. It's funny: In *Latino in America*, my mother called me after watching it and said, "There were no Afro-Cubans!" My own mother can't get into my documentary! I don't try to tell everyone's story. I tell *one* story.

WF: When your parents met in Baltimore in the late 1950s, interracial marriage wasn't legal there. So they married here, in Washington, D.C. Did they ever bring you and your siblings to D.C. as kids?

SO: Oh, yes! In fact [Bradley and I] just took our kids on the same trip I took as a kid, to walk around the Capitol and the Smithsonian museums. We gave each child a camera to take whatever pictures they wanted, then put it all together in an album. So much of D.C. is great...the White House, the Mall, the Lincoln Memorial. To stand in the spot where Martin Luther King Jr. gave his speech, and see it's marked *right there*. My daughter, who is 9, really got it...and it was the same *exact* trip I did with my five brothers and sisters when we were growing up.

WF: You're now working on the documentary *New Orleans Rising*. How is the oil spill factoring into your coverage?

SO: It covers New Orleans five years later, after Katrina. We watched [the spill] closely because obviously it will affect things five years on. I'm not yet sure how it will end up. Since it's a news doc, clearly we're going to talk about it.

WF: How is New Orleans doing? And what does it need right now?

SO: Tell me what you're looking at, and I'll tell you how it's doing. Parts of it are great, and coming back strong. The hotels are beautiful. And fabulous restaurants. At the same time, some neighborhoods are really struggling—it's a critical period, the tipping point. People are deciding whether to come back or abandon their homes. What does New Orleans need? A real plan for all the neighborhoods, allowing [locals] to take ownership for what their neighborhoods should become.

WF: You're also working on *Rescued*, which focuses on the plight of Haiti's orphaned and sometimes enslaved children. What does Haiti need now?

SO: Haiti needs infrastructure. People need to move out of the tents. Now you have people living in horrific conditions, a downward slide that has to be stopped and reversed, and put into the right direction, into better housing.

WF: How do you keep Americans trained on an important story like Haiti when it plays out not over days, but over months, even years?

SO: I think good news stories should *not* be like eating your broccoli. It shouldn't be: *This is important for you to know!* People will watch an important story if it's interesting and compelling. There are so many compelling stories coming out of Haiti. I just did a one-hour documentary that could easily have been two. It's riveting.

WF: What about personal travel? Tell us your favorite destinations.

SO: My husband and I go to Miami every year. And we take the kids to Europe—to Paris, Rome and, this year, to Barcelona. My daughter is going to volunteer in a Haiti orphanage with me. I'll take a trip to Miami with the boys just to hang out by the pool. The kids have had passports since they were newborns. I'd like to go back to the Galapagos Islands, where we went on our honeymoon, but take the kids this time. And I've never been to China or Japan. I've always wanted to go. 🌍