



## De Rossi, Portia (b. 1973)

by Tina Gianoulis

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Glamorous and statuesque, with a flowing mane of blonde hair, Portia de Rossi moved almost effortlessly from a teen modeling career to acting roles in films and television.

Few of her early fans would have guessed that she had also been an active lesbian since her teens. De Rossi herself believed for many years that a successful Hollywood career would require her to remain firmly closeted.

However, she refused to lie about her identity, and when outed by paparazzi while involved with rock singer Francesca Gregorini in the late 1990s, continued the relationship openly. In late 2004, when de Rossi became lovers with out lesbian comic Ellen DeGeneres, she took the final step out of the closet, becoming one of the most public lesbians on the American pop culture scene.

De Rossi was born Amanda Lee Rogers on January 31, 1973 in the waterfront city of Geelong in Victoria, Australia. Her father, Barry Rogers, died of a heart attack when young Mandy was only eight and she and her brother were raised by their mother, Margaret Rogers, who worked as a medical receptionist.

Mandy began working as a model in print and television commercials when she was only eleven. At the age of fourteen, she decided to adopt a more sophisticated name and chose Portia De Rossi.

De Rossi had also begun at an early age to be aware of her attraction to other girls. While still in high school, she fell in love seriously enough to gather her savings and ask her girlfriend to move in with her. She was rebuffed, however, and instead graduated from high school and started law school at the University of Melbourne.

After only a year of law school, de Rossi's life took a sharp turn when a casting director, impressed by her commercial work, auditioned her for a role in the John Duigan's 1994 film *Sirens* with Hugh Grant. De Rossi was cast as Giddy, a beautiful and virginal model. Though the film was fairly forgettable, it did include a homoerotic tickling scene among the titular sirens, and it led to more film and television work for de Rossi.

In the mid-1990s, she moved to Los Angeles to build an acting career. By 1997, she had been cast in Wes Craven's *Scream 2* and received critical praise for her excellent comic work. The next year, she was cast in a career-making role in FOX's quirky comic hit *Ally McBeal*. From 1998 through 2002, the former law student excelled in her portrayal of Nelle Porter, a razor-sharp lawyer known on the show as the "Ice Queen."

Meanwhile, de Rossi remained in the closet. In the tolerant atmosphere of the modeling world, she had felt free to identify as bisexual, but she felt certain that an open lesbian could not succeed as a film or television star. She had a brief marriage to documentarian and sound engineer Mel Metcalfe, after which she continued to date women, such as Guinevere Turner, the actor-filmmaker who produced the 1994 lesbian film *Go Fish*.



Portia De Rossi attending the Academy Awards in 2007. Photograph by Flickr contributor Pulicciano. Image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution Share-Alike 2.0 license

In 1999, de Rossi entered a serious partnership with singer-songwriter Francesca Gregorini. Two years into their relationship, paparazzi caught the pair embracing during a walk near their home, and the pictures hit the papers, making de Rossi's lesbianism an even more open secret. De Rossi did not comment on the photos, but neither did she deny her relationship with Gregorini. Instead, she proceeded with a kind of relief to live as a lesbian with a sort of "don't ask, don't tell" openness.

Like many of the women in the *Ally McBeal* cast, de Rossi slimmed down to almost skeletal thinness during her years on the show, but she endeared herself to fans when she later renounced dieting and criticized society's obsession with weight.

As a lesbian, de Rossi was also dismayed by the show's opportunistic use of girl-on-girl sex. In 2002, when the show was cancelled, she was happy to leave it.

In 2003, she was cast in another eccentric FOX comedy, *Arrested Development*, where she was an immediate fit as Lindsay Bluth Funke, a vain and spoiled heiress. She remained with the cult hit until its cancellation in 2006.

De Rossi has also appeared in a number of other films and television programs, including Paul Goldman's 2003 biopic about Frank Sinatra and Barbara Marx, *The Night We Called It a Day*, and Eric Laneuville's *America's Prince: The John F. Kennedy Jr Story* (2003), in which she played Carolyn Bessette-Kennedy.

In 2005 De Rossi portrayed a fortune-teller in Wes Craven's thriller *Cursed*; and in the 2007-2008 television season, she appeared as a lesbian in a recurring role in FX Network's *Nip/Tuck*.

At the end of 2004, de Rossi left her relationship with Gregorini to become involved with one of television's most famous lesbian personalities, Ellen DeGeneres. DeGeneres also left a long-term lover, photographer Alexandra Hedison, in order to begin her relationship with de Rossi.

DeGeneres had made a gigantic media splash in 1997 when both she and the character she played on her sitcom, *Ellen*, had come out as lesbians.

Becoming lovers with DeGeneres pulled de Rossi the rest of the way out of the closet in terms of public awareness of her lesbianism, as media sources from the tabloids to *People* reveled in reporting the details of the two high profile breakups and the new romance.

When the California Supreme Court overturned laws barring same-sex marriage in the state in May of 2008, DeGeneres and de Rossi announced that they would wed in the summer.

In an intimate ceremony, attended by only 19 guests, DeGeneres and de Rossi were married at their Beverly Hills home on August 16, 2008. The wedding was attended by both their mothers.

In 2009, De Rossi joined the cast of ABC's comedy, *Better Off Ted*, in which she plays an unapproachable boss.

In an appearance on the talk show *The View* in order to promote *Better Off Ted*, De Rossi was asked by conservative co-host Elisabeth Hasselbeck whether the battle for marriage equality was just a disagreement over semantics, "is the word [marriage] more important than the rights?"

In response, De Rossi eloquently defended the quest for marriage equality: "Every citizen of this country should have that legal right to be married," she said. "Marriage the word actually does mean something because people who see a gay coupling as a lesser thing in society can continue to [think] it's lesser than marriage when really it's the exact same thing. The exact same love, the exact same commitment, love of family."

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**Tina Gianoulis** is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.