

# Stand-Up Mom

She may make her living as one of TV's funniest women, but Julia Louis-Dreyfus is nothing but serious when it comes to raising two strong boys, putting her family first, cleaning up the planet, and helping the rest of us go green



Louis-Dreyfus put green technology to work in her family's home.

OPPOSITE: JIM WRIGHT/ICON INTERNATIONAL; MICHAEL WESCHLER/CORBIS OUTLINE

Julia Louis-Dreyfus is at the wheel of her hybrid. She's just left the set of her Emmy award-winning sitcom, *The New Adventures of Old Christine*, and is rushing back 90 miles from the Warner Bros. Studio in Burbank to her home in Montecito, Calif., where wildfires are destroying hundreds of residences and thousands of acres of land in counties bordering Los Angeles, including the enclave where she and her family live.

While her house—outfitted to be green with its net-metered rooftop solar panels, natural ventilation system, and sustainably harvested building materials—is thankfully in no immediate danger, she is hurrying to regroup with her husband of 21 years, writer-producer Brad Hall, and their two sons, Henry, 16, and Charles, 11. “And I need to check on my friends and neighbors,” she adds, worry in her voice.

As she tries to calm her nerves, navigate traffic, and simultaneously conduct an interview with WebMD over the cacophony of wailing sirens, Louis-Dreyfus, 48, does what so many women must do every day: compartmentalize emotions and responsibilities. She explains: “I’m driving and talking to you right now so I can give my full attention to my sons when I get home. It’s tough to be a working mom sometimes!”

By Lauren Paige Kennedy, WebMD Health Contributing Writer



Reviewed by Louise Chang, MD  
WebMD MEDICAL EDITOR

For a woman known around the globe for making people laugh, Louis-Dreyfus is nothing short of serious when it comes to talking about motherhood, marriage, health, and the importance of political activism—from environmental issues to cancer research to California's controversial Proposition 8 banning same-sex marriages. ("I'm despondent that it passed," she says. "I was very vocal in my opposition.") Elaine Benes—the hilarious *Seinfeld*

character that elevated her to the status of television icon—may be a screw-up with bad dance moves, while her newest alter ego, Christine Campbell, fumbles good-naturedly through a postdivorce haze, but the real Louis-Dreyfus is a smart, motivated, happily married mother with quite a few causes. And not enough time.

"I became involved with environmental activism as a two-part process," says the actor, who over the years has emerged as

an outspoken leader in the green movement and is associated with more than a dozen environmental organizations, including the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), the Waterkeeper Alliance, the Environmental Media Association, and Heal the Bay.

### Mother Courage

"As soon as I gave birth [in 1992], I suddenly noticed issues in my own backyard. Motherhood changed everything for me."

Becoming a mom in 1992 inspired Julia Louis-Dreyfus to suddenly notice "issues in her backyard"—the Pacific Ocean.



Her "backyard" is actually the Pacific Ocean, which was so polluted at the time that swimming and surfing were often banned at her local beach. But by the time her younger son arrived five years later, her lifelong-surfer husband was again suiting up to hang ten. Louis-Dreyfus was instrumental in making the cleanup happen; she became a board member of Heal the Bay and Heal the Ocean, organizations to which she still devotes time and energy.

But meeting environmentalist Robert Kennedy Jr. at a dinner party in the late 1990s compelled her to do more. "Kennedy is a true leader, a visionary, and an inspirational person. He connected all the dots for me."

Connecting all the dots meant truly re-examining how she and her family lived. "I'm a consumer," she admitted to the environmental website Grist.org. "I love the creature comforts. I can't live without my cappuccinos, my hot showers. Brad, on the other hand, would live in a tent if he could. ... I'm not the type to ride a bike to work, but I'll buy a hybrid-engine car. I'm not the type to cut back on hot showers, but there's no harm in hot water when it's warmed by the sun."

Newly inspired, she and her husband decided to go green within their own home. In 2002 they retooled their oceanfront residence by building a retractable roof to maximize light and minimize electricity needs, installing windows laminated with heat mirrors, and adding thermal panels to heat water and return any unused energy back to the grid. The house is both stunning in its design and a model of self-sufficiency.

Indeed, homes are where people can make some of the best green choices. "All buildings in America account for 40% of energy use in the United States, with private homes comprising 17% of the total," says Nick Zigelbaum, an NRDC energy analyst. "So lowering the greenhouse gas emissions from our homes is a critical piece in solving the environmental puzzle. Julia and Brad improved the overall efficiency of their house, and that's a fantastic way to lower emissions—and electric bills."

While not every American can afford such costly renovations, does Louis-Dreyfus think we're making progress when it comes to conservation, recycling, and burning less energy? "I do. It's awfully daunting; these environmental conflicts are not easy to solve. But the recent [presidential] election rejuvenated me, proved that we can get something done. It was a lesson that every little bit counts. If everyone commits to making a small change, suddenly you have a movement."

The environment, however, is not Louis-Dreyfus' only concern. She recently teamed up with Lance Armstrong for his national cancer awareness program, Livestrong, and its "100 Percent" campaign. One hundred percent of the funds raised go toward cancer research. "I was asked, and it was a no-brainer," she says simply.

And she participated in last fall's groundbreaking health-advocacy event, Stand Up to Cancer, with the goal of eradicating cancer by funding cutting-edge research. "A dear friend of mine died not long ago of leukemia," she says. "How can we not have cured this by now?"

Louis-Dreyfus and her husband are also producing a documentary about the world's unsung NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) that together work to end hunger, poverty, and environmental degradation. Louis-Dreyfus hopes their film will be screened by the end of the year.

### Family First

If there is one cause closer to her heart than all others, it must be her family. Married in 1987, Louis-Dreyfus still gushes like a schoolgirl about Hall, whom she met on the campus of Northwestern University in the late 1970s when they were both undergrads. After doing comedy theater together in Chicago, the couple reteamed for *Saturday Night Live* (1982–1985), where Hall was a



## EX-pertise

Divorced parents can team up to raise happy kids. Here's how

**Julia Louis-Dreyfus** enjoys one of Hollywood's happiest and most long-lasting marriages. But her character on *The New Adventures of Old Christine* is a newly divorced mother struggling to navigate tricky parenting situations with her ex-husband. WebMD asked family and divorce expert M. Gary Neuman, LMHC, to give parents pointers on how to split up without forever emotionally damaging their children.

**Don't make your kid the messenger.** "Too many parents attempt to communicate through their children, which causes undue emotional stress on them and forces them to negotiate a situation their own parents could not handle," says Neuman.

"Email is an excellent tool nowadays to communicate with your ex-spouse. ... If you want or need to speak with your ex over the phone or in person, be focused and stay on task—and, most important, don't swallow the bait if he or she descends into anger. Simply say, 'I appreciate your feelings, but I am here to discuss our child's school assignment.' Take the high road. Your child's emotional health depends on it."

**Try to "get" your kid.** "Kids need to feel as if they are understood," says Neuman, and after a divorce their feelings may be in turmoil. "Listen to them. Don't tell them what to think. And it might be difficult, but never criticize your ex—it's a criticism of your child, who of course is 50% of your ex-husband or wife. Respond specifically to what they are telling you. Say, 'It sounds like you are feeling sad/mad/upset about meeting your dad's new girlfriend. Is that right?'"

"As a parent, you don't have to have a solution, you just need to hear them. And don't editorialize. You can suggest your child write down his feelings and share them with your ex, but only if the child wants to do so. Stay trained on *your child's* feelings, not yours. Healing comes through a loving connection and from feeling understood."

**Avoid the third degree.** "I tell parents to treat their child's weekend away with their ex-spouse as if the child has just visited an aunt or uncle," advises Neuman. "Saying nothing will leave your child stressed, as if he must compartmentalize both worlds and tiptoe around this other experience. On the other hand, grilling the child puts him squarely in the middle, which is an impossible position emotionally. So ask your kid fun and general questions, which diffuses tension. And then let it go."—LPK

writer and occasional performer, and on her short-lived sitcom, *Watching Ellie* (2002), on which he served as executive producer. "I got lucky. I guess my instincts were good. He's a wonderful, wonderful man."

But juggling such a high-profile career, including, of course, playing Elaine on *Seinfeld*, which aired 1989–1998, with the demands of marriage and motherhood is not for the fainthearted. "It was *really hard* when I was younger ... there were days when I thought my brain would blow up!" she laughs.

Growing opportunities for women can sometimes be a double-edged sword, she adds. "Women want to do everything, and it's hard to pull off. I brought both my kids to work with me [to the set of *Seinfeld*] when they were little. It was great, but it also split my focus. I had a nursery set up so I could nurse them, then I'd run back to do a scene. Was that the best way? I'm not sure. You always feel this pull, like you're not giving them or your work your best. On the other hand, maybe it was good for these two little

**"I got lucky. I guess my instincts were good. He's a wonderful, wonderful man."**



Louis-Dreyfus shot to fame as Elaine on *Seinfeld*.

boys to see their mother working and having a fulfilling career. And I am in no way disparaging women who stay at home ... we beat ourselves up no matter what we choose. Inevitably, you make good and bad decisions. We all do. And you make mistakes. But you do your best."

Louis-Dreyfus displays a hint of dread when she mentions empty-nest syndrome. "Henry is already 16, so it's coming. The

generations, who basically left home at 18 and never looked back. They've had their lives scheduled from the start, from playdates to activities to classes. And while they are amazing kids—well-educated, fun, articulate, smart—they are not nearly as independent as we were when we were their age. They are not accustomed to managing every aspect of their lives, and they want and need their parents to remain on call, often for years."

The result is that most parents no longer feel that abrupt departure and loss of involvement. "We're seeing this phase, which has been coined 'adult-escence' or extended adolescence, last between the ages of 18 to 25," Brown says. "Tell Julia she just might one day say to her 25-year-old son: 'Please, go! It's time for you to move out!'"

### Funny Business

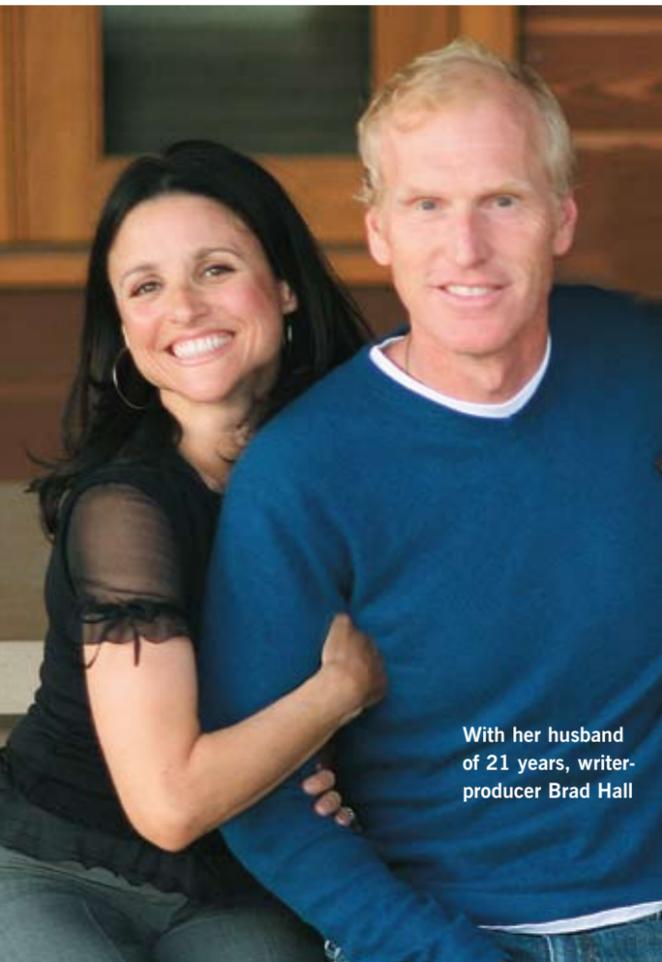
Louis-Dreyfus knows that, when it comes to kids and television shows, neither stays around forever. When *Seinfeld* ended after nine seasons, she faced the plight of reinventing herself—and shaking off the successful-sitcom "curse," the notion that audiences would never accept her in any role but that of Elaine. After joking about the curse on her pal Larry David's show, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, and then seeing *Watching Ellie* fizzle after one season, Louis-Dreyfus knew where she needed to go next. "I figured it was time for me to play a mom. It was territory I knew and had yet to mine."

The pilot for *Christine* fell into her lap in 2005. It was perfect for her, she thought, and critics and award-givers have applauded her insight. She won the Emmy for outstanding lead actress in a comedy series in 2006, 10 years after winning it for her work on *Seinfeld*. She plays a divorced mother who is relearning how to

child of a good friend of mine just went off to college, and it's been an extraordinary adjustment for her, as big as bringing a newborn home. ... It's so thrilling to see your kids evolve into thoughtful, active, independent people ... but what do you do without them?"

Nancy L. Brown, PhD, M.A., Ed.S, a Palo Alto Medical Foundation Research Institute child development expert, says Louis-Dreyfus will almost certainly not go through earlier generations' empty nest experience, defined by "questions of who am I ... and what do I matter if I don't have others' needs to fulfill?"

The reason? "Today's generation of kids—the [high school] juniors and seniors and those just going off to college now—have been raised so differently from previous



With her husband of 21 years, writer-producer Brad Hall

## 3 Ways to Green Your Home Like Julia's

Natural Resources Defense Council energy analyst Nick Zigelbaum offers homeowners these three cost-saving tips:

**Air no more.** It's been shown that most homes leak around 30% of conditioned air through the attic to the outside," he says. "So the most important thing homeowners can do to lessen their carbon footprint is seal the ductwork in their attics."

**Seal the deal.** "Seal the rest of your house with that 'hi-tech' tool, a caulking gun. Leaky windows need to be caulked and weatherized. It's time-consuming, but it's cheap and effective."

**Buy smart.** "Julia and Brad purchased Energy Star [a program developed by the Environmental Protection Agency] certified appliances—such as refrigerators and dishwashers—and they really make a difference, energywise."



Louis-Dreyfus, shown descending her stairs, outfitted her home with solar panels, a natural ventilation system, and sustainably harvested building materials.

date, how to be a single parent, and how to deal with an ex-husband who is very much still in her life. It goes without saying she plays it for laughs.

"I come from divorced parents," she tells WebMD, "and it wasn't always amicable. There were major complications at the time. Divorce wasn't nearly as prevalent as it is now. I had no friends whose parents had split up. I grew up living with my mother and stepfather in Washington, D.C., and visited my father and stepmother in New York on weekends. It seems antiquated now, but I had to learn how to deal with it."

Is she currently close with both sets of parents? "Yes, very," she says emphatically. And it's one of the reasons she loves *Christine*. In it both parents strive to put their child first, making for funny and compelling situations when it comes to juggling new love interests, homework assignments, and conflicting opinions on how to raise their son.

M. Gary Neuman, LMHC, family and divorce expert and New York Times best-selling

author of *Helping Your Kids Cope With Divorce the Sandcastles Way*, believes that putting your child first is the only way to maintain his or her long-term emotional health.

"When you criticize your child's other parent, you criticize your child's very DNA," he says. "Like it or not, what we do for and around our kids in childhood impacts them for the rest of their lives. Parents who are divorcing must take the high road with each other. When you swipe at or about your former spouse, your child stops sharing his or her emotions with you. You are shutting down trust and leaving your child with a situation he or she cannot resolve."

Great marriage, healthy kids, and successful career aside, Louis-Dreyfus is known in Hollywood for something else, too: Looking fantastic. She turned 48 last month, and she's still inciting Internet bloggers such as Perez Hilton to post photos of her red-carpet moments with comments like this: "Julia: So sexy! Everything's tight—including her bod!" Louis-Dreyfus giggles when this is read back

to her. "I'm a big believer in moderation," she says, when asked for her fitness secrets. "I like good food, good wine. I try to limit my intake of everything, but I enjoy everything, too. And I really do love to exercise. I go hiking a few times a week, I go running. ... The red carpet is daunting, but I try not to let it get under my skin. I'm not Heidi Klum. I still suck it in!"

"But I'm really lucky," Louis-Dreyfus adds. "Because I have a nice family that helps me stay focused on what's important. Hollywood's trappings are not my focus—I just really enjoy my kids and my husband."

As if on cue, the sirens sound again and Louis-Dreyfus mentions she's nearing home. It's clear she's already switched her focus to the fires engulfing her neighborhood and how they might impact her loved ones. Montecito and the nearby city of Santa Barbara would lose more than 200 homes that day and in the days that followed, many burnt to ashes. While hers was thankfully spared, it's tough to imagine this actor-activist has ever met a fire she didn't want to put out. ●

 Ready to green your home, but not sure how to start? Go to [www.WebMD.com](http://www.WebMD.com).