

Interviews: It's 1970s Again With Walton Sisters, Pamela Sue Martin

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on December 31, 2011 - 6:28pm

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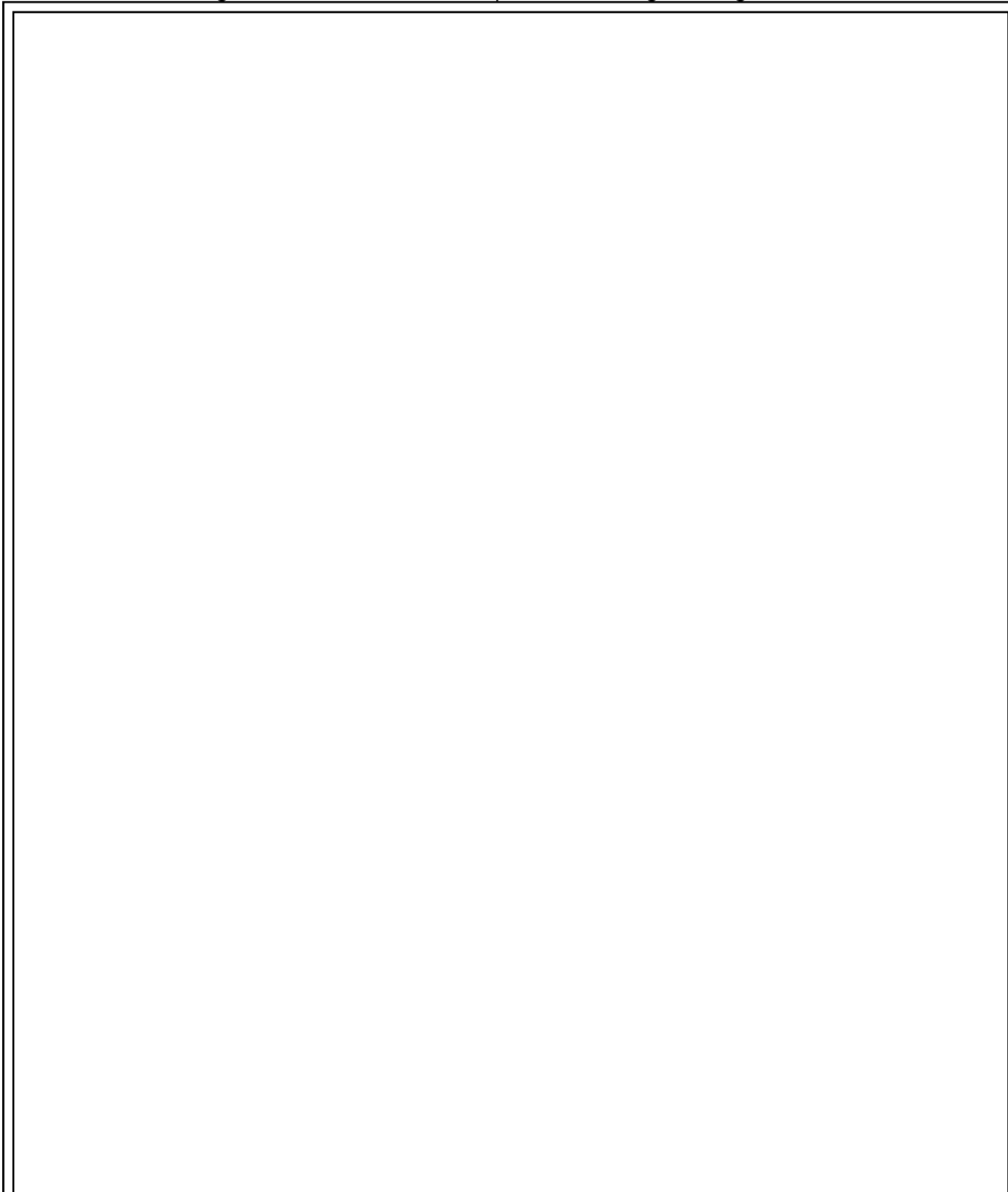
CHICAGO – This year marked the 40th anniversary of the premiere of “The Waltons,” one of the most beloved TV series of the 1970s. Two actresses who portrayed Mary Ellen and Erin Walton, Mary McDonough and Judy Norton, appeared at the “Hollywood Celebrities & Memorabilia Show,” along with Pamela Sue Martin of TV’s “The Hardy Boys/Nancy Drew Mysteries’ (1977).

HollywoodChicago.com was at the event to interview all three ‘70s icons, with photographer Joe Arce producing his usual stellar portraiture.



Judy Norton, Mary Ellen Walton on “The Waltons”

Judy Norton was memorable as Mary Ellen Walton, adding a little passion to the often saccharine image of the TV family. She also gained a bit of notoriety after the series ended by posing for Playboy in the mid-1980s. She is still working in the business, as an actress, singer, writer and director. She recently appeared on the “Today” show, reuniting with the cast of the Walton family on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of “The Homecoming,” the Christmas-themed pilot of the long-running series.





Judy Norton at the Hollywood Celebrities & Memorabilia Show, Chicago, March 26th, 2011
Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: Since you literally grew up on television during your teenage years, did you ever have any trouble distinguishing Judy Norton from Mary Ellen Walton?

Judy Norton: No. There were aspects of the character that were similar to me, I was a tomboy, and I really enjoyed that part of the character. But I really was aware of what the differences were, I really wasn't that much of a rebel. I didn't have as much nerve, so I really enjoyed being out there and more rebellious through Mary Ellen. It also gave me an opportunity to let go of some internal frustration through the character, which made it easier to be who I was.

HollywoodChicago.com: What type of image change were you anticipating when you decided to pose for Playboy in the mid 1980s?

Norton: I got a lot of advice from agents, publicists and various people after the series ended. I was paying these people to advise me, so I guessed I should take their advice. That was my first big mistake, to think that people who represented me knew me better than I knew myself. There are a lot of things to think through regarding the career choices you make, and it came down to the type of roles I wanted to do. I liked Mary Ellen, and I thought she was tough and passionate, and I never thought of myself as a sex symbol. Had I really thought it through, it would have come down to 'are those the roles I really want to play?' That wasn't really who I was, it was just different.

HollywoodChicago.com: Did you have any say in the direction of your character Mary Ellen in the series and were you ultimately satisfied with the developments in her fictional life?

Norton: For the most part, yes. After I got married and had a baby on the show, they killed off my husband at Pearl Harbor. Suddenly the character shifted, and we lost everything that Mary Ellen was about. I actually went to the producers, and creator Earl Hamner, and asked them what happened to the feisty woman who didn't want to conform to the roles of women of that time. They did take that to heart, so they crafted a story that she not only would be a nurse, but also go to medical school. It gave me a whole new, stronger story line about a woman in the 1940s struggling to be accepted and make it in medical school.

HollywoodChicago.com: But wasn't there a mystery involving your husband in the show where he actually ended up being alive?

Norton: Some point along the line, someone in the show thought it would be a great idea to find out my husband wasn't dead, and personally that was my least favorite story line of that particular episode. I thought it was stupid and I felt stupid doing it. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: In the pilot show of the series, the Christmas movie 'The Homecoming,' there was a more overt reference to the Depression that was softened in the regular series. Do you look at that pilot separately than the rest of the series?

Norton: Yes, in a lot of ways. First, there were different cast members, it was an opportunity to work with Patricia Neal and Edgar Bergen. It was a brilliant cast. It was also shot differently, it had a darker and grittier tone. Obviously that couldn't translate to the regular series. It was definitely different.

HollywoodChicago.com: Do the cast members of the show now ever talk about the impact it made in the portrayal of 'The Waltons' as a cultural touchstone? Is there anyone who is embarrassed now that he or she was part of the show?

Norton: When we do various functions where we're all being interviewed its almost universal that we get asked questions like that. During the course of the show, we really didn't understand the impact, and certainly no one had any way of projecting how far into the future it would go, and you don't know that 40 years later it will become part of pop culture. As actors, we sometimes were frustrated by doing the characters for that long of period, but I've never heard any of the cast say they weren't proud of doing the show. We've always been touched by the stories that people tell us on how the show helped them to get through in their lives.

HollywoodChicago.com: Who made the most money from the show, CBS, Lorimar or Warners? And was the cast taken care of with residuals?

Norton: I have no idea who made the most money, I'm not a businessperson. We don't get residuals. We came up through a time period with the union where productions were only obligated to pay residuals through a short period of time. It was the same for all TV actors from the 1970s.

HollywoodChicago.com: What can you tell us about Richard Thomas [John Boy] that the rest of the world doesn't know?

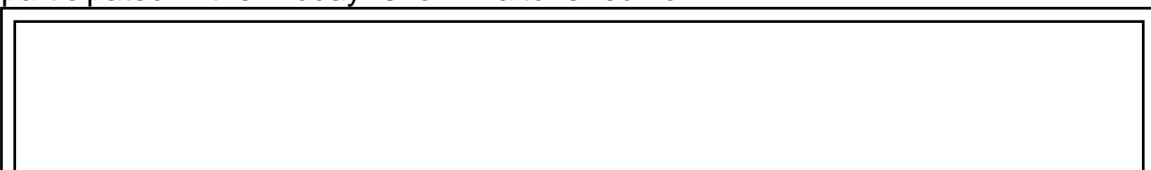
Norton: He's a good dancer. [laughs] I love Richard. Since most people so closely associate him with John Boy, they would be surprised to know that he is less like that character than other characters he's played. He's much more sophisticated, very well read and very well traveled. And he's very funny. Nobody would be disappointed to meet him and see how different and similar he is to the character.



The Walton Sisters Together Again: Judy Norton (Mary Ellen) and Mary McDonough (Erin)
Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

 **Mary McDonough, Erin Walton on "The Waltons"**

In March of this year, Mary McDonough released a new book, "Lessons from the Mountain: What I Learned from Erin Walton," a memoir regarding the show and her post-show life, which included complications from plastic surgery procedures. She is now an advocate for positive body image, and works both as a lecturer in that realm and as an actress on such shows as "The New Adventures of Old Christine." She also participated in the "Today" show Waltons reunion.





Mary McDonough at the Hollywood Celebrities & Memorabilia Show, Chicago, March 26th, 2011
Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: You have a new book, 'Lessons from the Mountain,' in which you view your life during and after your time on The Waltons. What reflection on your life's inventory told you it was time to write the book?

Mary McDonough: I think because I'm a coach, and do public speaking and workshops, that people kept asking me if I had a book. So people kept encouraging me. And as I say in the book, I was doing 'The New Adventures of Old Christine' and Julia Louis-Dreyfus and the others on the show kept telling me to write the stories down. It was a combination of enough time had gone by and I'd come out the other side, and I wanted to share it with people to help them.

HollywoodChicago.com: What did you feel about Erin Walton that you thought you never could achieve for Mary McDonough?

McDonough: I think Mary McDonough has gone beyond Erin Walton, because Erin was so caught up in being the middle daughter and the pretty one. And my lesson as Mary was to grow beyond that, and move on.

HollywoodChicago.com: In the pre-publication notes for the book, it speaks of your life after The Waltons as dealing with insecurities that were amplified by your time as a quote-unquote 'celebrity.' What normal activities were difficult for you because of this?

McDonough: Going to school, back and forth from the set. I talk about that a lot in the book. Being typecast as Erin Walton, which led me to make some very bad decisions regarding my health and body. I think all of that, plus wanting to work so bad and have validation as an adult.

HollywoodChicago.com: How did you reconcile the portrayal of a 1930s and '40s girl with the relative freedoms of going up as a teenager in the 1970s?



Judy Norton, Mary McDonough & Kami Colter of 'The Waltons'
Photo credit: Warner Home Video

McDonough: What was weird about growing up in both places, is that the Vietnam War was going on when the show started, so that was an whole education in itself. And since we were also living in the Depression, we got to learn to milk cows, ride mules and gather eggs from a chicken coop. It was a really diverse way to grow up, and I felt like I didn't have to reconcile it other than to appreciate how lucky I was to do all this fun stuff.

HollywoodChicago.com: There was no secret dope smoking, or anything like that?

McDonough: [Laughs] My book is not salacious, unlike so many others out right now. I throw myself under the bus and not anybody else. It's all about my lessons from the mountain and not Judy's or Richard's. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: What was the Waltons episode where you thought you stretched yourself as an actress the most?

McDonough: I love the episode called 'The Burn Out.' It was about pyrotechnics, working at night, the family house burning down and the kids splitting up. I had to go live with the preacher and his wife, played by John Ritter and Mariclaire Costello, and I became very 'churchy,' I pulled my hair back and wore sack gray clothes. It is my favorite.

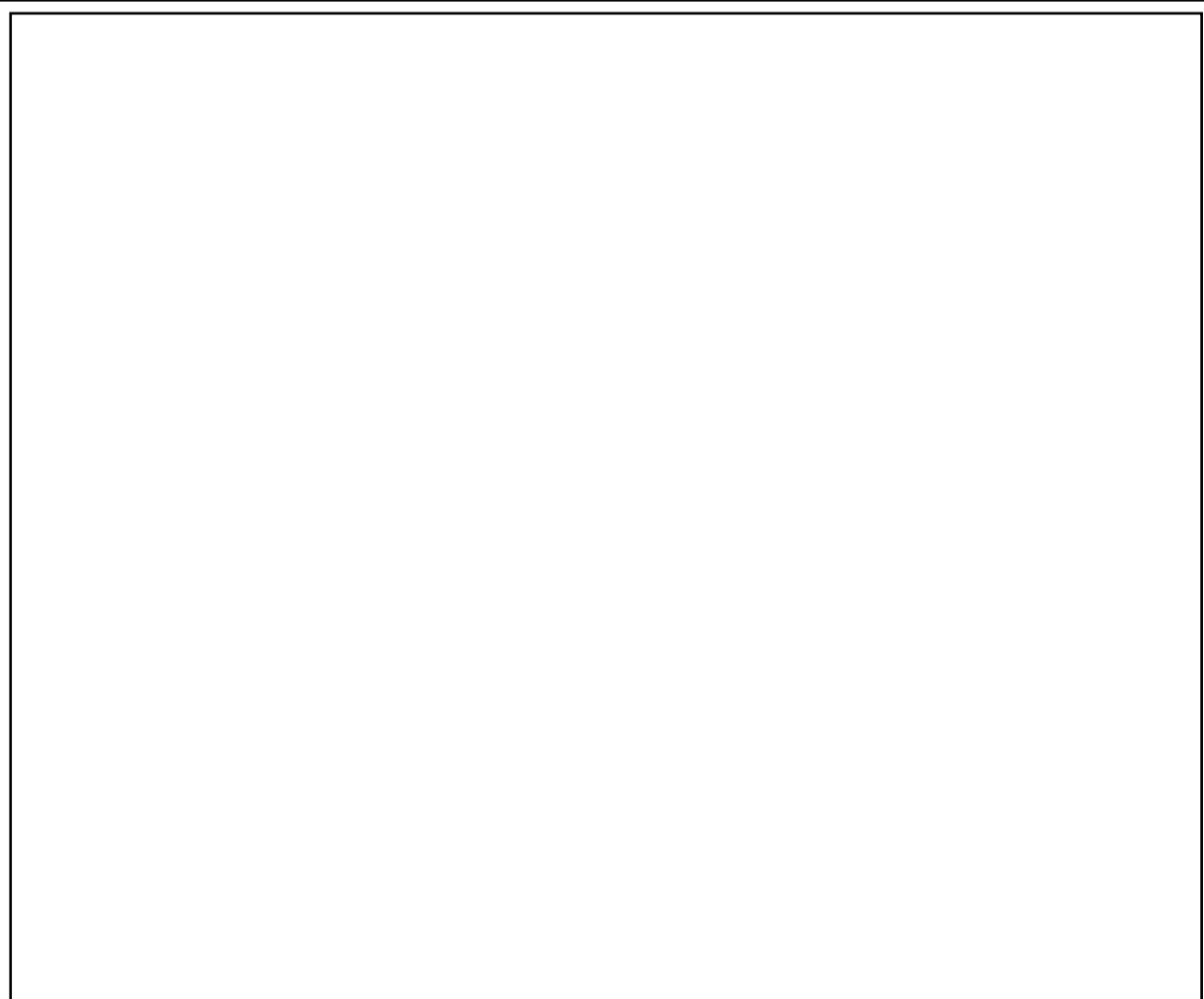
HollywoodChicago.com: What can you tell us about Ralph Waite that the rest of the world doesn't know?

McDonough: That he has a wicked sense of humor and he tells naughty, naughty jokes. [laughs] He's so perfect, and he's just hilarious.



Pamela Sue Martin, Nancy Drew on "The Hardy Boys/Nancy Drew Mysteries"

Pamela Sue Martin as Nancy Drew is a familiar crush to many of the teenage boys of the late 1970s, sharing screen time with Shaun Cassidy and Parker Stevenson on "The Hardy Boys/Nancy Drew Mysteries" (1977). Like Judy Norton, she also posed for Playboy around that time. She did act beyond that show, portraying Susan in "The Poseidon Adventure" (1972), John Dillinger's love interest in "The Lady in Red." (1979) and as Fallon Carrington Colby on "Dynasty" (1984). Most recently, she did a turn on the Showtime Channel series "The L Word." Passionate and forthright, she continues her activism in environmental issues and spiritual pursuit.





Pamela Sue Martin at the Hollywood Celebrities & Memorabilia Show
Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: What significant decision did you make that got you from being a high schooler in Westport, Connecticut, to the set of *The Poseidon Adventure* in two short years?

Pamela Sue Martin: I decided to leave the fast food joint I was working in and go to New York City to become a model, and make some money for college. And that was kind of the beginning, I fell into my first film [*To Find a Man*, 1972] and got *'The Poseidon Adventure.'* While all my friends were going to college, I was going to the *'College of Hollywood.'*

HollywoodChicago.com: How was that early ride? Was modeling easy for you and doing the films?

Martin: The whole thing was difficult. I was very young and it was hard for me. I was in an adult world that was very challenging, and I was very nervous for many years. But I made some money for college later.

HollywoodChicago.com: In the midst of your Nancy Drew days, you posed in *Playboy* magazine. What was the decision behind doing that and did it change your image the way you wanted it to?

Martin: I think so, yes. It wasn't a big deal for me. I never did any nudity in films, except for a brief moment in *'Lady in Red.'* Everybody always wanted sex to be the middle name. And I thought, fine I could do it. I didn't really put that much thought into it. Right after that I did the *'Lady in Red,'* which perhaps is my favorite movie, even though it was a weird, B-movie Roger Corman film, it was kind of cool.

HollywoodChicago.com: What is the genesis of your environmental advocacy, was there a particular event in your background that had you make a commitment to these causes?

Martin: What happened was that I am an animal lover, and I am a vegetarian. It was around the time of *Nancy Drew*, and although I never felt comfortable in the spotlight, I wanted to use it for something worthwhile. I wanted to use the publicity for something beyond the usual.

There was an ad in *Variety* that asked for movie people to come to a Greenpeace meeting. I was the only one that showed up. I ended up going on a Greenpeace mission in its heyday. It was the hardest thing I ever did, and it changed my life. We went to the seal slaughter up in

Canada. We were helicoptered onto the ice with Congressmen Jim Jeffords and Leo Ryan. Ryan died in Guyana near Jonestown shortly thereafter, and Jeffords later became a senator who changed parties in protest of George W. Bush. We watched the seal slaughter, and it really changed my perspective about man and nature, because it was so brutal.

That was actually the impetus for the Playboy cover. I talked about Greenpeace for the whole interview. I did every bit of publicity I could for the cause, because we couldn't use nature in this manner.



Pamela Sue Martin as Nancy Drew
Photo credit: Universal Home Entertainment

HollywoodChicago.com: You've written a couple of books, what is your latest about?

Martin: It is called 'Surviving Love and Madness,' and it has a spiritual and philosophical point of view. It is for friends and family of people who are mentally ill, because I have dealt with that through a partner. It is about how to remain balanced in life through loss in mental illness in others. I felt like now I can do something that makes all the superficiality and bizarreness of my early career make sense. It's been slow to get published, but I think it will be out next year.

HollywoodChicago.com: As a certified Religious Science practitioner, how do you think that type of spirituality can heal the divisiveness and pain the world is currently experiencing?

Martin: It's the only way to heal. Whether it's Buddhist or Muslim or Christian, when you get into more of a broad based spiritual concept of oneness, and understanding from a scientific point of view – when science and religion coalesce at some point – there is a large agreement that the two can come together. We are all connected.

I started studying Ernest Holmes, the founder of Religious Science, but it's not even called that any more, it's now the United Center for Spiritual Living. It's a new thought church, in the sense of how an individual projects their life from a spiritual perspective, and effects their life by the way they think. That was the scientific side. I went through all the studies, and I ended up becoming a spiritual counselor practitioner there, under the ministry in Sun Valley, Idaho.

HollywoodChicago.com: Finally, what can you tell us about Parker Stevenson that the rest of the world doesn't know?

Martin: I don't know what the rest of the world knows. He's just a super nice guy. I just ran into him recently in Los Angeles, and he's like the boy next door, still. He just couldn't be nicer. I just love him like a brother.

The "Hollywood Celebrities & Memorabilia Show" is now "The Hollywood Show" and will be in Chicago on March 24th and 25th [Click here for details.](#) [14]



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