

TV

## From ‘SVU’ co-stars to partners for life: Mariska Hargitay and Christopher Meloni’s friendship timeline

They started as co-stars on "Law & Order: SVU" over 25 years ago ... and remain each other's true north today.



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By Randee Dawn

It’s hard to imagine a meet-cute story more meety-cutier than the way “Law & Order: SVU” and “Law & Order: Organized Crime” stars Mariska Hargitay and Christopher Meloni met, all the way back in 1999 — when they showed up to audition for “SVU.” Fans know it, and fans love it — but they also know it was a potential near-miss: a future “Mad Men” star was also up for the role of Elliot Stabler!

“I was told by my agent that John Slattery was going to be there,” Hargitay famously related in 2009’s “The Law & Order: SVU Unofficial Companion.” “Chris walks in and I see this guy who’s all New York, cocky — everything that he is now he was then. I jumped up and I go ‘Slattery!’ And he goes, without missing a beat, ‘Meloni!’ Well, he and I, from minute one, were (doing) all this shtick and laughing.... I thought, ‘I want to be with that guy!’ Because we already had a thing.”

Well, that “thing” turned out to have legs — Hargitay and Meloni went on to star in “SVU” for 12 seasons as Olivia Benson and Stabler before he departed in 2011.





Christopher Meloni and Mariska Hargitay walking the carpet at the 2022 Emmy Awards in Los Angeles.

Mark Von Holden / NBC via Getty Images

Meloni reprised Stabler in April 2021 on the “SVU” episode “Return of the Prodigal Son,” before both Stabler and Benson crossed over to share the screen on the series premiere of the Stabler-led spinoff “Organized Crime.” But the truth is, all this time Hargitay and Meloni have remained BFFs — happily married to wonderful spouses — but absolutely BFFs who have each other’s backs. They frequently use the #PFL hashtag (Partners For Life) on their many, many social media posts about each other.

So how have the last 25 years and counting been going for this incredible on-screen and off-screen partnership? Let’s take a walk down the #PFL memory lane.

## 1999



Early days: Hargitay and Meloni on "Law & Order: SVU." **NBC**

From Day 1, Meloni and Hargitay were great partners. "SVU" premiered on NBC on Sept. 20, 1999, and introduced Benson and Stabler to the world.

As Hargitay told [TV Insider](#) in 2018, "From the second we met, bells went off. We knew we were going to be a huge force in each other's lives. He was intense and mercurial, but also fun."

## Chris Meloni reveals story behind 'Law & Order' set pics with Mariska Hargitay

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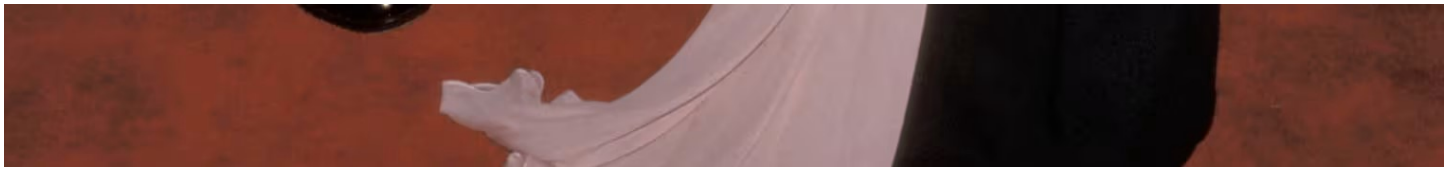
In May 2022, [Meloni revealed to TODAY.com](#) the story behind “a schtick” the two have had for years where they'd “clip each other in the chin,” he explained, and one of them would say, “You're great kid.”

“If we did a great scene, we'd go, ‘Hey, good job.’ So that — we were re-creating that,” he added, when asked about [sweet photos of the two of them on set](#).

### 2000

And this wasn't just posing nice for the cameras; a picture from the time shows Meloni helping Hargitay fuss with the back of her dress at the 2000 People's Choice Awards.





Christopher Meloni and Mariska Hargitay during the 26th annual People's Choice Awards at Pasadena Civic Auditorium in Pasadena, California. **Ron Galella / Getty Images**

Meloni has also always had his partner's back on the screen.

“Olivia, being a product of a rape and not being — raised by a single mother, hasn’t had a lot of stability in her life in terms of a male figure,” Hargitay told TODAY.com in February 2022 about her character. “And Elliot Stabler was the first person that really came in her life that really had her back.”

The actor added Stabler's “focus was to protect” Benson.

“And so there was such a deep safety in that, knowing that these two people, each other’s safety was almost the most important thing,” she explained.

That safety, Hargitay said, gave her character “such a confidence and a stability that she never had.”

## 2001







Mariska Hargitay (as a blonde!) and Christopher Meloni in 2001. **Jim Spellman / WireImage**

When “SVU” began, Meloni was already married to artist Sherman Williams, and the couple now have two children. When their first child, daughter Sophia, was born in 2001, Hargitay became her godmother.

“The birth of his first child and being privy to his amazing, solid relationship with his wife, before I had that for myself — I think that Chris and Sherman played a really big role for me, to see this really stable couple that loved each other,” Hargitay told *People* in 2021.

Meloni and his wife also are parents to son Dante, who turned 20 in January.

## 2004

Hargitay fell for “SVU” guest star Peter Hermann, who first appeared on the show in 2002, and the two married in 2004. They now have three children. Meloni had a front-row seat to the pair's romance.

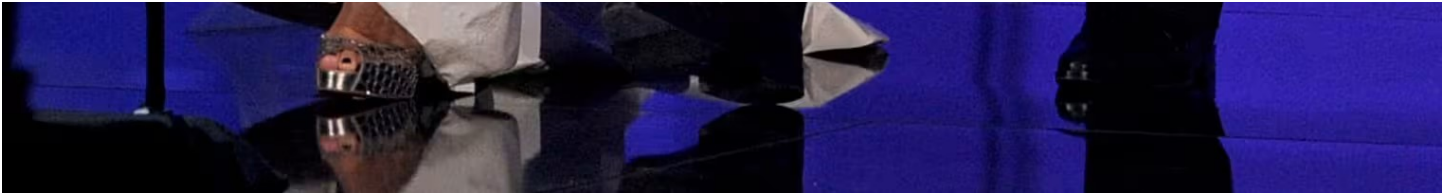
“(Hermann’s) on the show as a guest actor, I’m looking at her, looking at him, and I’m seeing how she’s acting, right? I know her, and I’m like, ‘Oh boy. Here we go.’ And she’s just, ‘Tee-hee, tee-hee, I don’t even care about him or anything like that,’” Meloni previously recalled to *People*. “I just thought, ‘Oh my God, it’s like I’m back in high school, or even grade school.’”

## 2010

On “SVU,” Meloni's and Hargitay's characters have not (yet) had a romantic

relationship — at least, no *overt* one — but the chemistry in the show reflects on their real-life portrayers.





Hargitay and Meloni onstage at the 62nd annual Primetime Emmy Awards in 2010 in Los Angeles.

Kevin Winter / Getty Images

At the 62nd annual Primetime Emmy Awards — where they were on hand to present, and she had a nomination — that chemistry showed all over again.

On the red carpet before the show, the two nearly kissed and had a sizzling response when asked by Entertainment Weekly if their characters would ever sleep together.

“We haven't planned anything, but we're always kind of rehearsing and getting ready for it,” Meloni said.

The duo answered, “Oh, yeah,” in unison in response to a question about if they'd want for their characters to go there.

“More than anything,” Hargitay added.

## 2011

Meloni exited “SVU,” leaving Hargitay “devastated,” as she told People in 2021. “I had to do so many mental gymnastics and sort of do a reinvention in my own mind, which of course turned out to be a gift, as any sort of growth is. But I was scared; I was sad.”

Hargitay continues to play Benson even today, making her the longest-running prime-time live action character of all time.

But, as Meloni noted, “We stayed connected.” And so their friendship entered a new stage ... full of Instagram memories shared with their fans!

## 2013

The pair showed off their fun side at a PSA launch for Hargitay's charity, The Joyful Heart Foundation, with a shared high-five. Meloni posted photos of the moment to his Instagram page along with the caption, "High fiving...something..with @therealmariskahargitay at the #NoMore PSA kickoff. @thejoyfulheartfoundation #NOMOREexcuses."

## 2014-2017

The birthday celebrations, dinners together, the hashtag #partnersforlife and general goofiness seemed to really take hold at this point.

The pair regularly share birthday wishes in public and spend holidays together.

The teasing they toss at one another is always fun to watch: In 2015, Hargitay wished Meloni (then 54) a #Happy73rd in her [Instagram post](#).

And they were also “Friends at Xmas,” as [more posts](#) show.

Perhaps realizing their fans need *more*, Hargitay also shared their post-Valentine's Day fun!



Meloni also signed on for a new series, “Happy,” in 2017, and Hargitay made sure to mention that in a post from toward the end of the year.

“‘Tis the season... ran into this #HAPPY man,” she wrote, along with a blurry photo of them smiling together.

## 2018-2020

The pair continued to celebrate their vacations, milestones and “Sunday night dinner” together.

“Easy like Sunday mornin...” Hargitay captioned a tropical photo of the two of them in July 2020, not long after news broke that Meloni would be bringing Stabler back to

the “Law & Order” universe.

And as Meloni told “Entertainment Tonight” in 2020, they’ve always remained friends even though they weren’t working together.

“We just pick it up right where we left off and we’ve said it’s like we don’t have this

relationship with anyone else... It's unique, it's full of laughter, she's full of love. We just kind of fall seamlessly into that place every time we see each other," he said.

## 2021

Then everything changed ... again! That's because Meloni returned to the "L&O" universe with his own show, "Organized Crime" — and naturally there had to be lots of "SVU" crossovers. Over the years, Benson and Stabler had become icons of TV and heroes to millions of fans, who loved the idea of the #PartnersForLife reuniting.

"It's all happening," Hargitay wrote on Instagram in January 2021, showing Benson and Stabler back again for the first time in 10 years. Naturally, she included a #P4L hashtag!

“(It was like) zero time had passed. We didn’t miss a step, and it just felt so good. It felt like home,” she told “Entertainment Tonight” in 2022.

All that year, Hargitay and Meloni began really blowing up their Instagram accounts with behind-the-scenes shots, which included hashtags that told the real story.

Hargitay captioned one photo of the two of them snuggled together with just hashtags: “#SetLife #SetLove #23Years #PFL #ItsAllHappeningBaby #WhatsInTheLetter #BTS #PeacefulEasyFeeling #WorkSmirk #GeeYourHairSmellsTerrific.”

The dynamic duo also made an unforgettable visit to TODAY and documented a moment together in a video backstage.

“It's Marshmelon,” Hargitay says in the clip (a reference to one of their nicknames which combines parts of both of their names).

In November 2021, the two spent Thanksgiving together with their families, including all-grown-up Sophia with her dad and godmother.

Sophia got another shoutout from her godmom earlier that year in March for her 20th birthday. Hargitay shared a throwback photo that appears to show Sophia as a flower girl at her wedding.



Meloni also made sure to celebrate the “22nd anniversary of us/svu” in September 2021 alongside his partner for life.

And they shared a pic from their dinner with “L&O”-verse creator Dick Wolf in December 2021.

In November 2021, Meloni presented his pal a Glamour award as one of the magazine's Women of the Year, giving a very gushy speech: “She’s got great energy, great personality. So tonight, I say this: Radiant. Charming. Funny. Generous. Elegant. Bawdy. Honest. Appreciative. Inclusive. Direct. Vivacious. That’s my favorite word; it comes from the Latin, to live. Which is what she does with great passion, every day, with everyone that she engages, be they friends, family, strangers, or commitments,” Glamour reported him saying.

Hargitay posted about the presentation on Instagram, thanking him for his “heartfelt” words.

## 2022

While speaking at a “Law & Order” red carpet event ahead of “SVU’s” 24th season in

2022, Hargitay told People that she rather liked being considered Meloni's "second wife": "That is awesome," she said. "It's kind of right in a way, isn't it?"

At the same event, Hargitay also told TODAY.com that she and Meloni always work on their scenes together to make them "the best and most truthful" that they can be.

She even recalled how special it is for the two of them to be able to film scenes together again.

"We are so in this thing of going down memory lane and remembering our favorite memories," she said. "And I'll tell you something, it's just a blessing because it rains down memories."





All envelope, no kiss: Hargitay and Meloni at the 74th annual Primetime Emmy Awards in 2022 in Los Angeles.

**Chris Haston / NBC via Getty Images**

Days before that event, the pair also attended the 74th annual Emmy Awards, again presenting an award — but also doing a little acting of their own in which they leaned in to seemingly to kiss — and then pulled away. Hargitay told People that the bit was “effortless” and added that she got to go to the awards with her “best friend.”

Two days after the award show, Meloni shared a tweet of himself with Hargitay after the Emmys, writing, “How it started How it ended,” along with a split picture of them looking fine — and of him giving her a piggyback ride post-awards!

And, of course, Hargitay did not miss a birthday, showing Meloni hugging her while he wore a jacket reading “21” and “61” — in honor of Sophia's birthday and his own. She wrote he was “aging like a fine wine.”



## 2023 and 2024



A smooch from Meloni to Hargitay on International Firefighters Day in 2023. [@therealmariskahargitay](#) via Instagram

The pair shared “the most epic day” with [Denis Leary’s Leary Firefighters Foundation](#) in time for International Firefighters Day in May, and Hargitay included some great pictures, including a cheek kiss from Meloni!

Instagrams continued to give fans a window into Hargitay and Meloni's worlds; they began sending "whisper" videos to one another not long after Meloni's return, like this one where he sent her flowers for her birthday:

(Hargitay said on “Late Night with Seth Meyers“ in 2022 that they have many names for one another — and he often calls her Marsha.)

In the first few years of “Organized Crime,” the “SVU” and “OC” writers have bent over backwards to tease fans that Benson and Stabler may not have turned their partnership into a romantic one (yet?!), but love one another deeply. In the final scene of “OC’s” third season, Stabler gave Benson a gift — a gold compass necklace. Hargitay shared a post in her Instagram story from the designer Me&Ro and exclusively revealed to TODAY.com that she and Meloni “designed it together.”

“We talked about him doing a necklace for me, and I wanted it to be a compass,” she added, noting that she had a prior relationship with Me&Ro designer and founder Robin Renzi. She said that Meloni came up with what the symbols on the compass — which usually stand for north, south, east and west — stand for.



therealmariskahargitay



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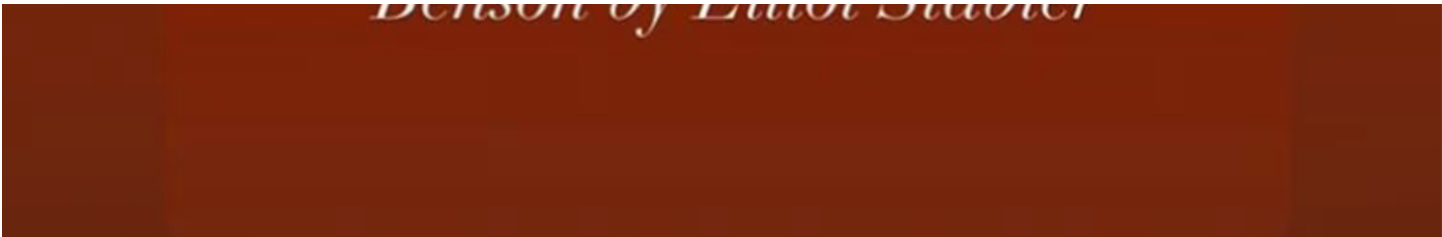
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*Love seeing our Custom  
Compass Pendant on the  
season finale of Law and  
Order: OC. Gifted to Olivia  
Benson by Elliot Stabler*



Benson by Elliot Stabler

@therealmariskahargitay via Instagram

A sneak peek from the “SVU” Season 25 premiere shone a bit more light on what the letters on the compass (not the usual N-S-E-W) stood for. The “J” was for “joy,” the “C” for “compassion,” the “L” for “love.” The “E,” however, was left unsaid. “Elliot”? Maybe — all Hargitay would say at the time was “soon.”

For now, both Benson and Stabler and Hargitay and Meloni remain each other’s true north — compass or no. Stay tuned for more on their friendship as it heads into its next quarter century!

## Randee Dawn

Randee Dawn (she/her) is an entertainment journalist and author based in Brooklyn. In addition to writing for TODAY.com, Variety and The Los Angeles Times, her debut novel, *Tune in Tomorrow*, about a reality TV show run by mythic creatures, published in 2022. She's also the co-author of *The Law & Order: SVU Unofficial Companion*. When not interviewing the stars or dabbling in speculative fiction, she dreams of the next place she can travel to, or cuddles her Westie. More at [RandeeDawn.com](https://www.randeedawn.com).

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