

TAKING HER JOB SERIOUSLY



Gina Swanson anchors the news over WDSU-Channel 6

By Anita Oubre

PHOTO COURTESY OF GINA SWANSON

During the month of March we highlight the contributions and achievements of women as we celebrate Women's History Month. How wonderfully appropriate to offer this feature on the multi-talented Gina Swanson.

Gina has the attributes that we see in women who are successful in their own right. As a wife and mother of two young children, this Emmy Award-winning journalist keeps herself busy as a news anchor and an adjunct professor at Loyola University, coaching students in Media Performance on delivery and presentation.

Appearing on air over WDSU-TV Channel 6, Gina is proud to bring the news to the viewers of her hometown. Her job has given her the opportunity to meet U.S. presidents, cover the Saints' Super Bowl season and be an eyewitness to history-making moments over the past 15 years.

While growing up in Algiers, Gina was a devoted viewer of Channel 6, especially the evening news. “I remember watching anchors like Norman Robinson and Margaret Dubuisson and thinking I can do this,” said Gina.

Her parents, who had relocated to New Orleans from Alabama, disagreed. “My father insisted that my brother and I work hard in school and get good grades,” said Gina. “He wanted me to be an engineer like he is. He was not convinced that journalism was the route to go and he worried I would not be able to take care of myself.”

Gina excelled in her studies and graduated from Edna Karr Magnet High School and Louisiana State University where she graduated with honors in Mass Communications and a minor in History.

“I was always interested in news and journalism. As a child I saw myself as a lawyer. I remember we had Career Day and I put my face on the body of the attorney with a business suit,” Gina laughed.

After earning her Master’s Degree from Northwestern University, Gina started her first job at a news station in Monroe making \$7.50 an hour. When she told her bosses that she had a graduate degree they bumped her up to \$7.75. But, despite the low pay, Gina persevered and continued along the path that was destined for her.

Her next move was to Austin where she worked as an anchor until finally deciding the time was right to head back to New Orleans and pursue her goal of bringing the news to her hometown.

Gina was excited when she was hired by WDSU in January 2008. However, the chance to anchor was not handed to her on a silver platter because of what she brought to the table in those early days. She had to pay her dues and at times she felt like she was “in the hamster wheel.”

Gina said she appreciates the lessons learned as a young reporter under greats like Norman Robinson. The standards were very high and, looking back, she values the time it took to learn those standards.

“Things did not go quite as planned for



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Gina at Loyola University where she coaches students in Media Performance

a long time,” she noted. “It wasn’t until my last news director, Akili Franklin, recognized that I should be anchoring our main newscast. She altered the trajectory of my career and changed my life. She saw something in me and took the time to groom and polish me to get to the anchor desk,” Gina fondly recalled.

Another influence on Gina was the late Nancy Parker who was both mentor and friend. Gina laughed as she recalled Parker reading one of her early stories. “I had this one story that I thought was cute. I even made a rhyme and Nancy was like, ‘Ugh... No!’ Nancy could really capture the spirit of someone and to this day I try to emulate that in my approach to storytelling.”

Gina is living her dream as an anchor and she enjoys her relationship with her viewers. She is recognized all over the city, whether in line at the grocery or picking up a coffee order. “I’m born and raised here and I think I understand the city on a cellular kind of level. I don’t know if New Orleans is the kind of city where you can just jump in and get it. It takes a while to get the quiriness, the ridiculousness and awesomeness of the city,” she said.

When asked about what kinds of stories resonate with her, Gina says that she tries to cover stories that bring joy and make the viewing audience smile. On the other



side of the coin are the crime issues and other types of not-so-good news that occur nearly every day.

“I don’t enjoy the crime stories but I do want to humanize them and connect the dots of our humanity,” she explained. “I don’t want people to ever think that a mom who’s grieving over the loss of her kid in New Orleans East or Central City isn’t experiencing the same pain that a mom Uptown or in the Garden District may feel over losing their kids. I work every day to make us realize that we’re more alike than we realize.”

Being able to not only showcase her community but also help those in the community are important goals for Gina. For Black History Month she worked on cultural stories that demonstrated just how special and unique New Orleans is. One in particular that meant a lot to her was the documentary on the late Leah Chase. "It was really special to present her with her flowers while she was still with us. People needed to know that she was not only a celebrated chef, she also played an enormous role in the civil rights movement."

Gina touched on some of the stories that make history such as Latoya Cantrell being elected the first Black female mayor of New Orleans. "Covering Mayor Cantrell during her first term was a moment that stayed with me. That was huge for our city," she said.

Storm coverage and keeping viewers abreast of severe weather conditions are an important part of her job as well, she noted.

One of the stories Gina is most proud of is her work on "Schooled," a documentary on charter schools that

looked into the education reform movement in New Orleans that took place after Hurricane Katrina. Gina said that "What's happening in our schools is something we all should be paying more attention to."

Whatever the issue or the story is, Gina appreciates being the storyteller and bringing them to her viewers each day.

Married to Willie Gray, the couple has a five-year-old son, Willie Jr., and a 10-month-old daughter, Elle. Gina allows extra time in her schedule to cook healthy home-cooked meals for the children each day. Joyful moments include bath time as well as feeding the children dinner. Recently she was delighted to witness the first steps that Elle took. Thankful for "a great support system," she has an appreciation for the millions of women who stay busy and "keep the train rolling."

Wrapping up, Gina stated, "When I hear the feedback from people in the streets or in the community saying I did something to help them by covering a story it makes me so happy to be on the air. I just want people to know that I take my job seriously. I don't take it lightly that I get to anchor the news every day. I try to stay connected to them and what's going on and I am glad they trust me to tell their stories."



Gina with her children, Willie Jr. and Elle



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