

Television



In the harmonious alternate universe of "Gina D's Kids Club," negativity, selfishness and sarcasm don't exist. Each episode, served up like a spoonful of sugar on Saturday mornings at 6 on WNYE (Channel 25), features a chorus of cuddly animal

puppets; a gaggle of unthreatening human characters; and the show's constantly smiling host, Gina D, who is as gentle and nurturing as Bambi's mother. Puppets and humans interact in the safe haven of the "kids clubhouse," an animated, three-dimensional set.

With its old-fashioned emphasis on soft-boiled life lessons, the show "harks back to the days before the 'Ninja Turtle' generation, which is when everything changed," said Gina D



Photographs from MG Studios

Somewhere in the Neighborhood of Mr. R

(whose full name is Gina DiFrancesco Mouery). Children's programming took a turn toward violence and cynicism during the 1980's and has never looked back, she said in a telephone interview from MG Studios in Orlando, Fla., where the show is produced.

"The thing I loved about Captain Kangaroo and Mister Rogers and Shari Lewis was that they were real people, and they made me feel good about myself," she said. "I really think we're filling that void."

Ms. Mouery is not the only human on the set. Tim Trombitas, the show's head writer, portrays several supporting characters, including Simon, a goofy Australian, and Miss Muffin, his personal favorite, who teaches young viewers how to prepare nutritious, fun-to-make dishes like the "butterfly sandwich," a grilled cheese sliced into triangles, with a baby carrot as the body and raisins as antennae.

Mr. Trombitas, 54, said he took inspiration for Miss Muffin from the 1961 television series "Hazel," which starred Shirley Booth as a controlling but lovable maid. "She had this way of always being fun, but had this great plump face; just happiness," he said.

That's certainly the mood that "Gina D's," which had its premiere in October, wants to bring about. "The focus of the show is to develop independence and social skills; to give kids a positive self-image, but of course to have fun too," said Mr. Trombitas.

In yesterday's episode, Hammy the hamster puppet was sick but afraid to go to the doctor. The rest of the show

was devoted to convincing Hammy that the doctor would make him feel better, and that Hammy might even enjoy visiting him.

"If we can put kids at ease about a difficult situation that they all must go through, then, wow, I really feel like we're doing our job," said Ms. Mouery, who has a daughter, 8, and a son, 4.

At least seven short musical numbers embellish each half-hour episode. Gina D, who looks and sounds a little like the 1970's entertainer Marie Osmond, performs most of the songs.

In the Doctor episode, she sang softly and reassuringly, "Hold your head up/

and keep your chin up/ you've just got to be brave."

The two men behind these warm and fuzzy lyrics are better known for rock 'n' roll than lullabies. Artie Singer, 85, was a co-writer of the songs "Rock 'n' Roll Is Here to Stay" and "At the Hop" for the 1950's group Danny and the Juniors. His partner, Roy Straigis, 73, was co-writer of the Tymes hit "So Much in Love." After working together in the 1950's, the two composers lost touch. Then, in 1987, they ran into each other at a supermarket in King of Prussia, a town outside Philadelphia, and learned they were neighbors. When Mr. Singer was approached about writing music for "Gina D's," he called Mr. Straigis immediately.

"I realized, at this point, what have we got to lose?" Mr. Singer said in a telephone interview from Mr. Straigis's home. But, he added, "today you can't just write 'Mary Had a Little Lamb' or 'Twinkle Twinkle Little Star.'"

Mr. Singer agreed. "Writing children's material is quite a challenge, because you can't get too sophisticated, yet you want to get beyond what children's music used to be," he said. "You want to grab the grandparents."

The grandparents are definitely a focal point for the show. At the end of each episode, Gina D writes a letter to her grandmother, sharing what she and her pals learned that day. And just in case that's not tender enough, her closing salutation seals the deal: "Always remember, you are a special person, and we love you."

— Hilary Howard



Gina DiFrancesco Mouery, top right, is host of "Gina D's Kids Club." Tim Trombitas (top left, as Miss Muffin) is the show's head writer.