

# Profile

## Happy days for Paramount's Nardino

Twenty years ago, Gary Nardino's parents wanted him to go to work for Prudential. But he had his eyes on rainbows, not rocks, and he chose show business instead. Today, Nardino occupies a key perch atop the television world as president of Paramount Television, a company that boasts five of the top-rated shows on the air this season (*Mork and Mindy*, *Happy Days*, *Laverne and Shirley*, *Angie* and *Taxi*) and will field two more contenders next fall (*The Associates* on ABC and *Working Stiffs* on CBS).

Nardino is one of the few top executives in television who can claim to have worked his way up from the secretarial ranks. His first job out of the Army was as a secretary in the William Morris Agency TV department, an early exposure he recommends as one of the best ways to learn the business. "I saw right away that this was the best outlet for my abilities," he says now. "I could use my business sense, sales sense, managerial abilities and parlay them with a good perception of people."

It didn't take him long to become an agent, a job that put him in intimate contact with writers, producers, directors and packaging companies. His first big client was Skitch Henderson, the bandleader. "I had an uncle who was in the music business. He saw in me ingredients he thought were right for being a talent agent, and he really helped launch my career by introducing me to Skitch Henderson. Eventually I represented other people who worked on the *Tonight Show*—including their head writer, Al Robbin."

Nardino learned early how to establish a good rapport with writers—the people he calls the foundation of the business. "Even now, I do that best for Paramount. I realize that I'm just a suggester—a guide—not their teacher. I help writers realize what they're trying to create. I facilitate what the creative people do. I help protect them and their work. And since we have a good record of getting shows on the air, writers want to work for us. We have a sensational roster of people, and I'm responsible for giving them a happy atmosphere."

Nardino feels he has several advantages in running Paramount's highly successful television division. "First, I have tremendous support from a cohesive management team. Michael Eisner (Paramount's president and chief operating officer) is the finest executive and creative mind I've met in all my 20 years in the business. Barry Diller (chairman and chief executive officer) is absolutely terrific. They are the best in the business, and they give me all I need to run a successful operation.



Gary Nardino—president, Paramount Television, Los Angeles; b. Aug. 26, 1935, Garfield, N.J.; BS in business administration, Seton Hall University, 1957; U.S. Army, 1957-59; trainee, William Morris Agency, New York, 1959-61; TV agent, Frank Cooper Associates, New York, 1961-64 (purchased by Ashley-Famous Agency in 1964); vice-president, TV, 1969; New York TV department head, 1972; senior vice-president 1973-76; vice-president and head of New York TV department, 1976-77; president, Paramount Television, Los Angeles, since 1977; m. Florence Poluse, 1965; daughter Caroline, 18 months.

"And I started with an incredibly talented team—Garry Marshall, Tom Miller and Ed Milkis. I was able to branch them out so people like Lowell Gans, Arthur Silver and Bob Runner could start their own companies, and then we get more writers and more good products to sell and it just keeps going."

What is it that keeps Nardino going? "Maybe it's the trepidation that gives me the edge to keep going. In this business you anticipate failure, so I struggle to keep it from happening."

But Nardino admits it's tough to keep on top. He's been at Paramount for two years and the work has gotten harder rather than easier. "It's tougher than I anticipated and it's tougher this year than last. When you're a winner it's tough to keep on top and manage something this large.

"But I get this terrific feeling of accomplishment when a show gets on the air and it's a good show that people watch. I love feeling that accomplishment."

Others at Paramount second that motion. Garry Marshall, among the most successful producers in Hollywood, has been at Paramount for 10 years. "I've been through many regimes," he says, "but Gary's is one of the more pleasant.

"He's supportive and flexible. I often train new people for jobs as writers, producers, directors. Gary was the first new boss at Paramount to use the people I trained. He appreciates my training program where the other top men saw it as nepotism.

"For instance," Marshall continues, "I was asked for a suggestion as to who should direct a new pilot here called *Working Stiffs*. I said Penny Marshall, who is my sister, would be great as the director.

"The network thought it was a silly idea but Gary was willing to take the shot and let Penny direct it. No one else would have done that. They would have said, Penny's an actress, or Penny's never directed before, or Penny's your sister.

"But Gary doesn't care about a person's track record. If he thinks the person can do the job he gives the person a chance, and he fights for the person. That's what happened with Penny, and *Working Stiffs* got on the air.

"Gary doesn't judge talent by what's on the outside, either," Marshall explains. "A guy could come in and be clean-cut, bright, organized and articulate—a guy who knows how to play the trappings game. But Gary won't fall for that.

"He has faith in talent so he doesn't bug you on your methods. I work Chinese style. That would drive other bosses crazy but Gary doesn't always go by the book so he doesn't mind if I don't either.

"And he knows how to guide shows and protect the people who work for him. That's why people stay here. That's why we've been able to be pretty successful."

Circumstances in Nardino's personal life have also fostered his work efforts. "My wife and I divide our time between our homes in Connecticut and Los Angeles. When she [his wife Florence] and my daughter [Caroline, 18 months old] leave Los Angeles for Connecticut, I just pour myself into my work. The house seems so quiet I'm forced into concentrating solely on my work."

Gary Nardino is very happy with the way his life has shaped up. "Things have flowed for me. I've worked really hard but things have consistently happened. I had never thought about going to L.A. but when Michael Eisner called me and asked me to work at Paramount I immediately said yes. I realized it was the right thing to do—I wanted to do it.

"I remember when I started work at the William Morris Agency for \$50 a week. I shared a one-room brownstone in New York for \$90 a month. My roommate and I ate lots of bologna but it was exciting, fun and glamorous. It was a great time of life. But it's great now, too."

And, Nardino adds, his parents are happy, too.