



Mamma Lena and Dino

HER VOICE is as familiar to Italians as Ken Howard's was to punters.

By
KEN SCULLY

She is warm, friendly, human, concerned, interested and has brains and vigor as well as personality.

No wonder she is known as Mamma Lena.

For four nights a week — Mondays to Thursday — from 7.15pm until 10pm, she advises, informs, gives the news, entertains during 2KY's Italian program during which she has Frank Fraumeni (incidentally a St Vincent de Paul member who was active in the Catholic Youth Organisation) as announcer.

They say if you want a thing done ask a busy person — and Mrs Lena Gustin is a busy person.

In addition to conducting and preparing her radio program, she counsels, interprets, translates, does community work and is a housewife and a mother of two.

Though he stays in the background you sense she appreciates the fact that her husband Dino is her prop.

Mamma Lena has been conducting radio sessions for Italians for nearly 15 years. She began with 2SM, for six months, moved to 2CH where she spent 12 years and has been with 2KY for two.

A naturalized Australian she has made a remarkable impact since she first arrived here from Italy in 1956 — and has made an outstanding contribution to the successful settlement in NSW of many new settlers from Italy.

During a visit to Rome a few years ago Mrs Gustin said 90 per cent of Italian migrants were happy in Australia and when any told her they were leaving Australia for good, she always urged them to obtain permission to re-enter the country.

Almost always they wanted to do this after a short period.

Mrs Gustin and her husband live in Bankstown and attend Mass at St Jerome's Church, Punchbowl. Her daughter Rosalba has an Arts degree (with first class honors in Italian) from Sydney University and is now studying a degree course at the National University in Canberra. Robert, her son, is doing a course in mechanical engineering at NSW University.

In 1967 Italy recognized Mamma Lena's valuable work for migrants and Australia and awarded her its second highest honor — The Cross of the Cavaliere — making her one of the few women to be so decorated by the Republic.

And in 1968, she received the MBE from the Queen for her services to the community — the first Italian-Australian woman ever to become a Member of the Order of the British Empire.

But if success and honors come her way, it was not easy.

Mr and Mrs Gustin know what it is to be "stragglers". They married in 1940 — and you do not have to have many memories of World War II to know what a young couple had to endure in Italy in those times.

When they first came to Australia from Trieste neither she or her husband knew English and could not obtain work for six months. Mr Gustin had to take a job as a laborer, despite the fact that he is a journalist who has worked on journals in Turin and Trieste.

Mamma Lena was no slouch either educationally and professionally. She studied languages at the University of Foscari in Venice (she also speaks French and Spanish fluently)

studied journalism at Florence University and worked on a journal. Her

Mr Snedden added: "She has been untiring in her efforts to promote the welfare of newcomers, and help them integrate more easily into the Australian community."

She has worked in with priests who are chaplains to Italians, putting them in touch with migrants or sending emigrants to them, she has informed the Italian community of special Masses and ceremonies and told them of churches where they may attend an Italian Mass.

"The most important thing I try to do is to drive people to learn how to live in Australia. I hope I am guiding people ... even when I'm indicating where they can purchase things they haven't been able to buy. I want to help them to become integrated into the community and to assist them to become Australians. Perhaps I am succeeding in some way, for I constantly receive letters thanking me for what I am doing."

"I think they feel they have a confidant in me," she added modestly. And with equal modesty — as if to apologise — her husband commented: "They trust her."

She has eased that problem of thousands facing life in a new country — the loneliness of being a stranger in a new land. Her advice on Australian laws and customs, some of which baffle even the native-born Australian, has proved vital in the settlement

of many Italian families.

She gives counsel on housing difficulties, business, health, taxation ... but many times all that has been required of her is a patient ear and a friendly word.

For the comfort she has given over the air her broadcasts were once tabbed the "voice of an angel".

Though her sessions have brought advertising and revenue to the radio stations she has broadcast from, it is by no means "commercial" ... though without that finance she couldn't continue it.

But it does not begin and end when she goes on air.

Early every morning Mr and Mrs Gustin prepare for the broadcast. He, the producer of the program, listens to the world news, and especially Italian broadcasts from Italy, on the receiver in his home, picks out that which he considers will interest his people here, goes through the local newspapers and translates them, prepares copy for the program, arranges it to format. It takes some six or seven hours preparation for the three-hour session.

News, music, advice, information, travel, a dash of sport and a social, family chat, touch of nostalgia and atmosphere "from home" ... and thousands of eager and receptive listeners.

Then there is the river of correspondence, the simple

requests written in English that the younger generation Italians send in, like will you tell our parents we love them but can't express in the language they understand.

And the telephone. Mamma Lena, snored under by hundreds of letters which she answers, has hundreds of calls a week. From 7am to 11 at night the telephone rings and the requests come in. Hours off air are spent helping others, doing social work.

The letters and telephone calls come from young and old and the in betweens. No wonder on her program Mamma Lena plays music that will help people "forget the cares of the day."

Can you find my child who has left home, my daughter who has gone, a husband who has slipped away? Can you contact my parents for me?

And the letters from Italy from mothers and fathers, relatives and friends of those who have come to Australia, but do not write any more.

They might not know where an individual is, or what he or she is doing — but they know where Mamma Lena is and what she does.

These people trust her, especially the poor, the bothered, the concerned, the lonely, the depressed.

All feel she understands them ... and so they call her, with affection and with a hint of filial love: Mamma Lena.

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