

Lena — mother to the Italian community

Lena Gustin, MBE, member of the National Women's Advisory Council, the State Ethnic Broadcasting Council and Italian broadcaster, can be forgiven if she looks a little tired.

Her 20-hour day begins at 7.30am when she gets up to cook a lunch of soup, meat and vegetables for her husband, Dino. It does not end until about 3am.

"There is no weekend for me", and there has been no holiday for 12 years. "I only go home and work," she said.

Lena Gustin is perhaps better known as Mamma Lena, one of the old school of radio personalities who broadcasts a mixture of music, news and good wishes, amid frantic reports of trotting and greyhound races for two-and-a-half hours four days a week on 2KY.

The music is from her own collection of close to 6,000 records, and the program is produced by her journalist husband.

He is up at 5.30 am recording and preparing a version of the Italian news for a quarter-hour bulletin before his wife's show and also looks after the program's sponsors.

The commission from this is their livelihood.

An average 27,000 listeners tune to 2KY each Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday that Mamma Lena broadcasts, but who is listening for the races and who is a Mamma Lena fan is difficult to assess.

Mamma Lena can only



Lena Gustin

On air

By ROSANNE ROBERTSON

guess her popularity by her mailbag, the invitations and the phone calls which make her day so long.

Her life is her work. "I don't care about working very hard," she said in Italian accent still strong after 23 years here. "People must have something to relax with."

"I hear you and I start to cry," the same people write, "It's like going back to Italy."

One night there is a meeting, the next a function; Mamma Lena and Dino rarely have a chance to eat their favourite fish and chips with friends.

Her fans are not limited to the Italian community.

Over the years, her efforts to raise large sums for Italian

disasters such as the Florence floods and the Friuli earthquake, for a kindergarten in Sicily and a child-care centre at Fairfield have been recognised by the Italian Government with the country's second highest honour, the Croce di Cavaliere and by the Queen with an MBE.

The couple and their two small children came to Australia in May, 1956, among 28,000 Italian migrants looking for a new life.

They settled in Bankstown where they still live and, for the first six months, Lena, a former teacher fluent in French, Spanish and Italian, found life extremely hard.

The facilities for new mi-

grants did not exist and people laughed in the supermarket when she could not pronounce the names of goods. "I cried so many times," she said.

Things changed when she took on a part-time job in a coffee bar, and became a columnist for the Italian newspaper La Fiamma.

This led to broadcasting community announcements on 2SM, in November, 1956, and soon extended to a one-and-a-half hours weekly program in which Lena Gustin did her best to encourage her homesick and confused compatriots

She left for 2CH after 18 months, dissatisfied that the program had to be pre-recorded, but not before she had trained a young woman called Franca Arena to succeed her.

It was on 2CH that her half-hour week-night program broadcast for 14 years consolidated her popularity, and earned her the title of Mamma Lena.

She moved to 2KY when 2CH became a Good Music station in 1971 and the work goes on.

On December 22, 200 Italian, Greek, Portuguese, Spanish, Turkish, Hungarian and Australian children will perform in a mini-festival for the Year of the Child. The event has been organised by the indefatigable Mamma Lena with her welfare fund Sorella Radio.

The money raised will go to the child-care centre for Italian children at Fairfield.

"Until I can't do it, I'm happy to do it" she said.