

# Marla Gibbs "227" series heads into fifth season

## STAR SPEAK



FRANK SANELLO

Marla Gibbs became a popular TV star as Florence, the smart-alecky maid she played for 10 years on "The Jeffersons" on CBS.

Rejecting the offer of a spinoff series based on the Florence character, Gibbs chose a riskier route and began a new series, "227," on NBC. It's about the gossipy residents of an apartment building in Washington, D.C. She plays Mary Jenkins, the building's manager and resident busybody.

The award-winning sitcom, now beginning its fifth season, was an immediate hit, which confirmed Gibbs' decision.

Gibbs, who is 58 years old, has always been a risk-taker. Instead of spending her hiatus from "227" appearing in TV movies or feature films, the philanthropic actress created Crossroads, an educational and performing arts center in a predominantly black neighborhood of Los Angeles.

Born and raised in Chicago, Gibbs eventually moved to Detroit with her then-husband and appeared on local television in the Motor City. After her divorce, she moved to Los Angeles in 1969.

Gibbs appeared in local stage productions before being tapped for her star-making role on "The Jeffersons" in 1975.

**Q. What would you like to see happen to Mary Jenkins this season?**

A. I want more involvement with the other family members. One of our

shows does that in spades. Mary's husband gets locked out of the house. When he finally gets in, he catches me in what he thinks is a compromising position.

**Q. Is it a compromising position?**

A. You'll have to watch. But I promise you, it's HOT!!!

**Q. This is your fifth season. How do you keep "227" fresh?**

A. We're going to get involved in topical issues. I love comedy. But I want to make people think a little while they're laughing. I don't think the two are incompatible.

**Q. Would you like your character to have a career outside the house?**

A. Yes. I've talked to the writers about that. I want Mary to get involved in counseling gangs, the homeless or drug abusers — so we get a chance to really offer some alternatives to the community. These are issues people are interested in. We can educate them and at the same time be hilarious.

up something on her own.

**Q. Does "227" provide positive role models for blacks?**

A. Absolutely. It would be ridiculous for us to have this powerful forum called television and not be promoting positive role models.

**Q. You started out on local television in Detroit. What did you do there?**



Marla Gibbs

A. I was on a show called "Juvenile Court." On one episode, I played the mother of a young man who had thrown a brick at a passing train and caused an injury. I got letters from viewers who thought I really was the boy's mother! We were very early "reality programming."

**Q. Your press biography says you went to boarding school. Did you grow up well-to-do?**

A. My father was a mechanic who had an ice business on the side. We lived in a neighborhood that had poor people and middle-class people. We lived in a house that was originally owned by Al Capone's banker — somebody called "Big Jim" Colosimo. In retrospect, our family spanned several socio-economic classes. I went to

boarding school, Catholic school and public school. At one point, we got clothes from a local charity, but I never felt poor. The clothes were very nice.

**Q. Are blacks still discriminated against in the field of acting?**

A. There's racism against blacks in everything. I believe people are basically good, but they've been subcon-

sciously programmed to go along with racism. There's even racism against blacks by blacks! I think acting works against programming. That's why I want to see acting taught in schools.

**Q. What would Marla Gibbs like to be doing in 10 years?**

A. In 10 years, I hope I won't have to work on the social problems we have now. I'd like to be producing and starring in some good films. By then, I'll be 35.

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**'I want to make people think a little while they're laughing.'**

— Marla Gibbs

**Q. Your co-star Jackee did a spinoff pilot that didn't make it onto the fall schedule. What happened? Will Jackee return to "227" this season?**

A. Jackee is coming back. The gossip is her pilot has to be reshot, but that's only gossip — and far be it from me to spread gossip. Jackee will be on approximately one-fourth of our shows. That will give her time to work

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