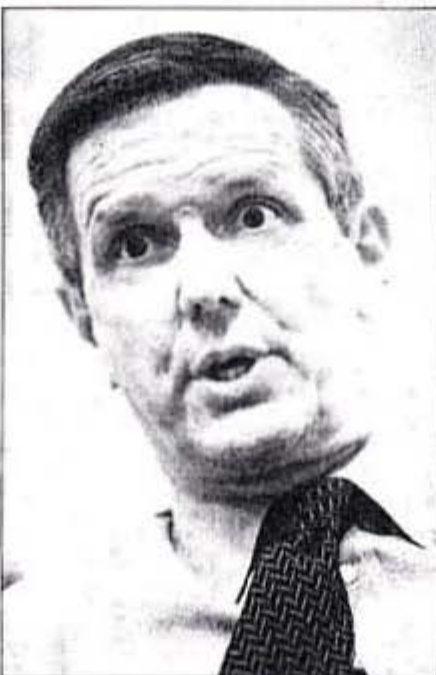


# TV Sunday

As 'Good Morning America' closes in on 'Today,' people are realizing they don't know who co-host Charlie Gibson is. Let him explain...



## Charles in charge

By MICHAEL GILTZ

**C**HARLIE Gibson is sending an e-mail from his office at the "Good Morning America" studios in Times Square.

"Does 'solvable' have an 'e' in it?" he asks. "No, I didn't think so, either."

He's a terrible speller and an even worse punctuator — that's one reason why the 58-year-old anchor of ABC's morning show went into broadcasting instead of newspapers.

Spelling is a problem, but everything else comes easily. Gibson is a rare talent who has enjoyed success at every level of television news but is still only vaguely appreciated.

Like Johnny Carson — another TV fixture who made his job seem deceptively easy — Gibson is someone everyone likes.

But unlike every other TV news stars at the top of their field, Gibson doesn't have any rough edges, any discernible personality quirk that defines him. Dan Rather is eccentric, Peter Jennings is urbane, Tom Brokaw is earnest, Barbara Walters is driven, Sam Donaldson is combative and so on.

But Gibson? He's... nice. "He's a terrific pro, a guy with real substance and an easy charm, which can sometimes be underestimated," says

Shelby Coffey, a former executive at ABC News and CNN who is now a fellow at the Freedom Forum. "He's done awfully good work substituting on other programs, like 'World News Tonight' and 'Nightline.' And 'Primetime Thursday' is of course extremely versatile."

Because Gibson is best known for his stints on a morning show — a time-slot in which women make their journalistic reputation but men are seen as lightweights — that skill has never been fully appreci-

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ated, until now. ABC News mainstay Sam Donaldson argues that the recognition of what Gibson has accomplished is long overdue.

"I will just say this," says Donaldson, "without taking away a single thing from the very smart professional women that Charlie has worked with — Diane Sawyer only being the latest — I think Charlie's contribution has been often... not over-

looked completely but often thought of as maybe not the central contribution.

"Charlie Gibson I think is... the main reason why 'GMA' did so well in the '80s and seems to be coming back now." High praise.

Indeed, "GMA" is breathing down the "Today" show's neck as never before since the mid-1990s. And the turn-around has been swift and undeniable.

Gibson and Sawyer agreed to co-host the show in January of 1999, just to provide stability for a few months.

"A friend of mine says there ought to be a little announcement at the end of the show that says: 'Good Morning America'... in its third year of having Diane and Charlie fill in for a couple of months," he laughs.

Gibson found a certain relief after stepping down from "GMA" in May 1998. His wife, Arlene, is a principal (they have two daughters) and for the first time in 12 years he was able to sleep in later than her.

"When I signed that contract [in 1996], I said, 'This will be the last three years I do this,'" says Gibson. "Now, at the end of

that three years, would they have kicked me out? Probably. They felt the program needed to go in a new direction and I didn't think they were wrong."

Still, Gibson doesn't seem to take pleasure in knowing that ABC came back to him on bended knee.

"A number of people have asked me that," says Gibson. "Was there some sort of vindication? I never really felt that at all because I didn't feel there was anything to be vindicated for. It was time for me to go."

"My real reservations for coming back were, 'If it was time for you to go, why isn't it still time for you to be gone?'"

"I still haven't particularly resolved that except to this extent: the show is not an individual. The show is a combination of people. I loved working with Joan. But when you do the show with Diane, it's a different show. And that revives your sense of discovery."

"Lisa McRee is a very nice human being," says Gibson. "But we didn't click. I certainly wasn't going to return to work with her."

Sawyer and Gibson had never worked together before, but her interest in teaming with Gibson was the main reason he came back on board.

Watching Gibson and Sawyer on the set See CHARLIE on Page 104

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is like watching a show-within-a-show. Gibson smoothly puts a person unused to TV interviews at ease, while Sawyer jokingly signals her impatience to the crew when a guest who can't see her rambles on too long. Their obvious chemistry is why "GMA" is surging.

His respect for the news business began young.

Gibson was born and raised in Chicago — the son of mining machinery industry executive. He moved to Washington with his family at age 12.

"I was expected to know what was on the front page of the Chicago Tribune or the Washington Post," Gibson says. "Both my mom and dad combed the paper every day."

Gibson — the youngest of three — remembers sneaking over to a friend's house to watch the first televised political conventions. When his family finally bought a TV (he was 14), Gibson and his dad faithfully watched the "Huntley-Brinkley Report."

Gibson went to Princeton, but after failing to get into the law school of his choice in 1966, he started working for the RKO news syndicate in D.C.

"I did that for a while," says Gibson, "and then the union caught on that they had hired somebody who was non-union and they had to relieve me of the job — rather than pay me the union salary, which was 75 cents higher."

This was just when Vietnam was heating up and Gibson — just out of college — was a prime candidate. A friendly woman at the draft board remembered his warm manner when registering and took it upon herself to warn Gibson that his draft notice was in the mail.

Gibson had two days to enlist somewhere or risk being sucked up by the Army and shipped out right away.

The Air Force wanted to make him a cook. The Marines offered only to send him to Parris Island the following morning.

Gibson's father urged him to give the Coast Guard, where he was way down on the waiting list, a final shot.

That led him to Chief Vernon I. Suggs — one of those characters you meet and know only briefly but change the course of your life irrevocably.

Suggs talked with Gibson about his school, his career and what he thought about the war (Gibson was against it, he thought, but willing to go if he had to).

Just as Gibson was ready to leave, Suggs told him that — suddenly — there was an opening on the waiting list he could join the Coast Guards.

"I never saw him again in my life," Gibson says quietly. "I met him for an hour and a half. And the Marine unit that I would have been in got called up."

Though he never went overseas, the war created difficulties for Gibson at home — just as it did for so many others.

Family arguments became so heated they finally agreed never to discuss it.

"My dad was a very strong



Charlie Gibson and Diane Sawyer agreed to co-host "GMA" in January of 1999, just to provide the morning show stability for a few months.

NY Post: Ralph Ginzburg

supporter of the war," says Gibson. "My mom was, too. I marched [against it] in '69 and '70."

After serving in the Coast Guard, Gibson returned to TV, training at a DC affiliate and then shipped off to a sister station in Lynchburg, Va. There he spent three years in the late '60s mining the wealth of stories about desegregation in a town that was deeply prejudiced — complete with whites-only restaurants and a local media that simply never reported on the activities of black people unless they were arrested.

"These young turks came down from Washington D.C. and we got right in the middle of it," remembers Gibson, who was by then earning all of \$6,500 a year. "We were considered socialists and race mongers."

Gibson says he was following

all died from it. [Gibson's older brother is still alive.] I try to avoid doing stories about that on the air. It's just too personal."

After three years, he came back to D.C., worked in radio, then went to the University of Michigan, where he confirmed once and for all that law school was not for him. He returned to Washington to work for a minor-league TV news syndicate, where he first met Sam Donaldson.

"Sam is an extraordinary guy," says Gibson, who was ostensibly competing against the ABC hot-shot on the Nixon impeachment story. "He would sit me down and critique my previous night's piece. He'd say, 'This was really good here; you blew it in the middle of the piece, but then here ...' And he did that probably a dozen times. It wasn't an everyday thing, but that's extraordinary for a network correspondent to do that."

Finally, Gibson was ready for the big leagues.

"A friend of mine called," says Gibson, "and said there is a job available at ABC and you should apply for it. I was able to drop into the interview that Sam knew who I was. So I presume they went and asked Sam 'What do you think of him?' And they hired me."

Donaldson says he certainly remembers urging ABC to hire Gibson, but adds that "success has a thousand fathers" and is sure he's just one of many who saw Gibson's talent. Gibson was hired by ABC ultimately covering Congress and later working as a general assignment reporter. But Gibson found his home in 1987 seated next to Joan Lunden.

Though he left "GMA" on his own terms, coming back to revive the franchise with Sawyer — and perhaps even take it back to the top — would be a sweet victory. But he isn't gloating.

Gibson reveals why a second time around on "GMA" was so tempting — and why he may be doing it for even longer.

"Rather than vindication, it was sort of a crutch" to rejoin "GMA" admits Gibson. "All of a sudden I could go back to being 'That guy from 'Good Morning America' — and that's easy."

## My Post, My Paper



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Cely Gallopo, 25, bartender, Manhattan

his conscience more than any ideology.

"I really am apolitical. Something that I'm not particularly proud of and I probably shouldn't tell you is that I don't vote. I don't vote so that I don't have to decide in my own mind.

"It doesn't prevent you from having a preference for one candidate over another, so I'm not sure if I'm right or not. My wife says I'm dead wrong.

"The one issue about which I feel strongly is smoking because my mom and dad and sister have