



Writer-producer Martha Williamson has the right touch



Martha Williamson, center, appears with "Signed, Sealed, Delivered" actors Kristin Booth, left, Eric Mabius, Crystal Lowe and Geoff Gustafson. (Hallmark)



By **Ronald D. White** · Contact Reporter

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The gig: Writer-producer Martha Williamson is best known for the hit "Touched by an Angel," which ran for more than 200 episodes on CBS. Williamson, 60, is now working on four movies that will run on the Hallmark Movies and Mysteries channel in 2016. They build on her "Signed, Sealed, Delivered" series about a dead letter office where long-delayed mail arrives at strangely appropriate moments because of some divine intervention. Williamson develops pilots for her company, Moonwater Productions, as well as consults with businesses that want to feature their brands on faith-based and family-oriented shows.

Looking up: The Denver native's career has been driven by the idea that there is a place for "inspirational family entertainment" that still takes on heavy subjects such as an adoption challenged when the birth mother resurfaces and a widowed father who must find the strength to raise his daughter alone. "The audience that was there for 'Touched by an Angel' is still out there, and they are hungry for this kind of programming," she said.

Parental partners: Her father, Joe, set an early example by making his wife, Betty, a partner in his business management firm. "He was a de facto feminist," Williamson said. "Not a lot of men in the 1940s and 1950s chose women as business partners, much less their wives. They were quite a wonderful team. All I ever wanted to do was become the person they wanted me to become."

Early entertainment: Her father led community singalongs to raise money for war bonds. Her mother was a soloist for the local symphony. "I grew up around a lot of music, but there was no rock 'n' roll," she said. "All I had to listen to was classical music and oratorios." Williamson could belt out songs too, which helped her find a niche at Williams College — a place she found intimidating and demanding. "I was 'the girl who sings,'" she said, performing for the Ephlats, the Massachusetts college's student a cappella group.

Network alumni: Williamson found a mentor her senior year in Williams College alumnus Andrew Smith, who was writing for a sitcom. "You are the only person I know in showbiz," Williamson told him, "and now I'm going to haunt you until you help me get a job." She advises students to do the same. Mentors are "so busy that this is what you have to do for them to help you get to the next level. The only young people who succeed are the ones that don't give up."

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the most remarkable people in show business to her, and I got to be the fly on the wall and listen and learn."

Big breaks: Working on Disneyland's 30th anniversary TV special, Williamson learned that one of the writers was ill. "I volunteered and wound up writing the intros for the hosts. I was told, 'Hey kid, this isn't bad.'" Williamson wrote for several shows, including the 1980s sitcom "The Facts of Life," eventually turning to producing. One project resulted from a failed pilot called "Angels Attic." "I wrote a brand-new premiere episode for it. The only thing I decided to keep were two of the actors, Roma Downey and Della Reese. Best decision I ever made. It was a chance to take a show with a light, family element and bring in some serious issues."

Back in the business: "Touched by an Angel" ran for nine years, until 2003. Then Williamson took time off, went to China with her husband and adopted two little girls. With the girls in their teen years, Williamson returned to entertainment for the 2013 pilot of "Signed, Sealed, Delivered."

The payoff: Smith found Williamson a spot as an assistant to entertainer Carol Burnett's producer and head writer, Kenny Solms. "I started at the bottom, making coffee," Williamson said, "but Carol drew

Leadership style: As with "Touched by an Angel," Williamson writes or rewrites every script. "The best shows, I think, have a single vision," she said. "If you try to run a show by committee, it is always going to be diluted." She also believes strongly in her father's teaching that "faith must be backed up by action. Be uplifting. Be positive. Find the good in people. It's what I try to do with my work even now."

Recognition: Williamson has received the Edward R. Murrow Responsibility in Television Award and the Anti-Defamation League's Deborah Award, among others. She is a member of the Television & Radio Hall of Fame and a Williams College trustee. She served for two years on President Obama's White House Council for Service and Civic Participation.

Personal: Williamson has been married to husband Jon for 17 years. Their daughters are now 14 and 16. On a recent trip home to Southern California after filming for long days so far north in British Columbia that it is still pitch black at 8 a.m., she relaxed by throwing her annual Christmas party for a large guest list where many weren't acquainted with one another. "I want you to make some new friends tonight," she told them.

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