

September 10, 2006

Calling Mary Poppins

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You'd think a nanny who could convince a mother to banish a 150-pound pig to the backyard and stop feeding her children on the floor could tackle just about anything.

And anything is just what Yvonne Finnerty, a part-time Cape resident, is asked to do as one of the British child-raising experts decked out in cap and cape for Fox-TV's "Nanny 911."

"I knew there was a pig, but I didn't know how big and ugly he was," Finnerty says with disgust of that infamous episode. The mother "was treating the pig better than her children. I had to get her to put the pig in perspective and make her look at her daughters."

Finnerty has recently been filming for the reality show's third 13-episode season, which debuted Friday, with segments featuring her slated to air later this fall. She joined nannies Stella and Deb for the second season of giving emergency help to families in trouble, coincidentally replacing another British nanny named Yvonne. ("People were really confused. It was never really explained.")

Her first assignment in April 2005 was with the other two nannies, helping give a break to a mother with 26 adopted children, most from other countries and many with disabilities. Finnerty also was called in to straighten out a household in which everyone screamed, the son was ignored, and the father was as childish

pouty and whiny as his kids; and a family with six children under age 10 where the mother was exhausted and remote, while the father devoted himself to church duties, admitting he'd rather not be home.

She still corresponds with three of the families from last year and reports that the positive changes she helped to engineer have stuck - the family with six children is even having another baby. The family with the pig, however, got many nasty comments on the show's online chat boards and has moved; she has lost contact.

Finnerty, who lives in Boston when not on Cape Cod, is never sure where "Nanny 911" producers will send her; they select the particular nanny to match each family. She believes her biggest strengths are her sense of humor and her success with sleep issues, and teaching manners and respect.

Executive producer Gerry McKean says the show considered a couple of hundred candidates to replace the first Nanny Yvonne (who "didn't quite have the TV presence we were looking for"), adding "it was important for us to have the English nanny because we liked the old-school approach."

Taking a shot

Finnerty impressed him with her background - including caring for her disabled brother while growing up in England - as well as her manner. "Nanny Yvonne is quite curt and to the point," he says in a telephone interview. "Large families are quite good for her, and families with older kids because of her school experience. She's playful and fun, and older kids respond to her."

Finnerty, who has no children of her own, wasn't looking for TV fame. She has worked as a nanny, both live-in and live-out, for 20 years in the Boston area and held various positions at private schools. In January 2005, her husband, David Wahtera, heard the show was searching for families in the Boston area and e-mailed the producers an "if you ever need another nanny" note. Within 10 days, Finnerty was in Hollywood taking a variety of tests, then finally joining the show.

"She was a nanny for 16 years, and I'd been a part of everything with the kids," explains Wahtera, a sales representative of custom blinds to home stores. "I know how she is and what she's like ... as a nanny. She was just a natural if you wanted someone to go in and straighten out a family. ... I took a shot and got lucky."

Finnerty has enjoyed the travel and experience connected to the show and has entered other new phases of a child-care career. She recently started writing a "Dear Nanny Yvonne" parenting column that runs Thursdays in the Boston Herald and hopes to get that syndicated. She also conducts parenting workshops and hopes to hold some soon in the Mid-Cape area. She recently started working to build up the long-term-nanny placement program with Boston's Best Babysitters (www.bbbabysitters.com) - which also supplies event, residential and hotel nannies - and continues to work as a temp with that organization.

The time frame of reality TV - she has to be ready on short notice to spend 10 days with a family somewhere in the country - has made it difficult to have more long-term commitments. But she has gotten the chance to work on a long-planned children's knight-and-castle-based storybook project that teaches behavior around the seven deadly sins and corresponding virtues.

Teaching tool

She jokes that her husband is quick to tell people she is a TV star; she tries to lay low - "I'm not an actress, I'm a nanny" - and isn't often recognized. People sometimes do look at her, though, as if they're trying to figure out where they've seen her before. While doing the interview at her Cape Cod condo, Finnerty met some visiting teen fans by the pool. (McKean says mothers are the biggest fan base, but the show also attracts a lot of teen viewers.)

Laina Abolfazli, 14, of Worcester says she and her friends are big fans and use the tips while baby-sitting. She thinks the nannies' horrified reactions to the situations are the funniest parts of the show, but likes "the informational stuff - it has entertainment and learning purposes."

As a baby sitter, Laina has modeled her own use of timeouts after what she's seen on "Nanny 911": "I'm good with the severe talking, but I'm not a parent. It's hard to punish them straight out."

McKean calls it "fulfilling" to know that a reality show can help people. "It's amazing how many people write in to tell us how the methods the nannies are using actually work. They do put it to the test."

Another selling point? Comparison. That's what helps keep Laina's mother watching.

"She says, 'I'm so glad you guys aren't like this,'" Laina says with a laugh.

Because the kids can be eyebrow-raisingly bad.

Sorting it out

"Nanny 911" episodes open at "Nanny Central," where the nannies all sit amazed while watching a videotape of what goes on with that week's family. The chosen nanny is dispatched to the home and spends a week with the family members, trying to turn them around.

Finnerty says she can usually recognize the problem in just a few minutes, but it can take a long time to get the families to see what the real issues are. "You see 45 minutes, and we're there for 100 hours. If there's a sleep issue, we're there 14 hours a day. It's a lot more intense than it looks."

Thousands of families apply to the show (www.fox.com/nanny911/info.htm) and go through a rigorous screening process. Those who aren't chosen, Finnerty says, "are either not bad enough or too bad." McKean says: "We like it when (the kids) are screaming loud and misbehaving. It makes good TV and gives the nannies a challenge."

At a family's home, Finnerty observes, often showing shock and exasperation in TV scenes, then comes up with rules and procedures for the family to follow. Finnerty is big on rewards and positive reinforcement.

"I don't think the families realize how serious it is that they're going to be on TV. They do forget the cameras are there," she says, commenting on the horrible parenting revealed to a national audience. "We don't go in to mess around. We go in to sort it out."

She says she always starts with the parents because "that's where 90 percent of the problems are. ... They've asked for your help, and you're holding up a mirror to them. We're not particularly polite about it.

"If you're working for a family, you have to hold your tongue and pick your moments and be a little more diplomatic, but on the show you can just say what you mean."

Eye-opening moments

The family with the pig was recommended for the show by a grandmother, though the father was tired of the animal situation and the whole family (except the pig) sleeping in the same bed. He simply wanted a normal life.

"When you're in that situation, you don't kind of see the woods for the trees," Finnerty says. "You need someone from the outside to come in and tell you what they see. It's an eye-opener."

Finnerty acknowledges she was skeptical that all these families would find a happy ending after weeklong nanny visits, but says, "It's true. They have this light-bulb moment."

On the show, she wears a cap and cape, and the logo's nanny holds an umbrella, so comparisons to Mary Poppins are inevitable. Finnerty likes it.

"I have the most respect for Mary Poppins. I wish I carried her little tricks in her bag."

The family-helping concept has proved intriguing enough that "Nanny 911" has been joked about on late-night talk shows, parodied on "South Park" and spinned off to TV shows in Europe, Canada and even Russia.

The show is "huge in England," Finnerty says when asked if her family there is able to experience her TV fame. "It's probably because they love to watch the American families messing up. But people don't quite get the hat-and-cape thing."

(Published: September 10, 2006)