



**ABC's Charles Gibson, 2006 Paul White Award recipient, loves the news**

# → Go-To



**THE MORNING TEAM**  
In his two stints with GMA, Gibson has been paired with Robin Roberts and Diane Sawyer (left) and Joan Lunden and Spencer Christian (below).



**H**e's "Charles" on the air and "Charlie" everywhere else. He's there for us in the morning and he's often there for us in the evening. He has become ABC News' "go-to" guy during the network's difficult months when Peter Jennings was ill and Bob Woodruff was hospitalized. He co-anchors Good Morning America with Diane Sawyer and Robin Roberts. He shares the anchor chair for World News Tonight with Elizabeth Vargas. And he is a co-anchor of Prime Time Thursday.

He's been "Charles" since the first day he went on the air because it sounded "a little bit more formal" at a time when he had a feeling "that television was getting a little informal." However, formality had its limits. His mother wanted him to use his middle name, to be on the air as Charles DeWolff Gibson. "I thought, 'Oh, my God, how awful that would be,'" he recalls during a phone conversation in early February.

**By Bob Priddy**

# Guy



## An Early Introduction to News

Charles Gibson grew up in a family of voracious news consumers who lived by the front pages of the *Chicago Tribune* when the family lived in a Chicago suburb and later the *Washington Post* and *Times-Herald* after they moved to Washington. He was expected to participate in dinner-table conversations about current events.

Gibson believes that immersion in reporting of current events led him to where he is today, receiving what he calls “a great honor,” RTNDA’s Paul White Award. “If you want to prove to your parents that you’re worth something,” he says, “you go into something that will impress them.” Were they impressed? He’s unsure, but “the fact that David Brinkley and Herb Kaplow knew my name was the biggest thing to them, possibly because those were people they watched all the time.”

His television career began the day Marlin Perkins picked him out of the crowd at the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago and let him feed a gorilla on Zoo Parade, an experience he remembers as “pretty cool.”

His family got its first television set when he was 12. He and his father watched local evening newscasts in Washington that included a five-minute puppet show featuring a frog named Kermit.

## Setting and Achieving Goals

Gibson turned his back on law school and a career at a big firm and instead decided to be part of a more select group—the 120 correspondents working for the then-three television networks. “I decided if I didn’t get one by the time I was 30, I’d go to law school,” he says.

He fudged a little on that goal. He was 32 when he joined ABC, moving from the syndicated service Television News Inc., where he had covered the Nixon resignation and later the Watergate conspiracy trials.



## POLITICAL SIT DOWNS

Gibson has interviewed each of the past six U.S. presidents as well as national and international leaders.

In the 32 years since then, he has given Americans up-close views of Congress as ABC News’ chief correspondent for the House of Representatives, of the presidency as a White House correspondent, and more as anchor of *Good Morning America* first from 1987 to 1998 and again from 1999 to now.

He says his happiest days as a reporter were the days he covered the House and the Senate. “I loved the chaotic nature of all of it and the access that we had to the people we were covering,” he says.

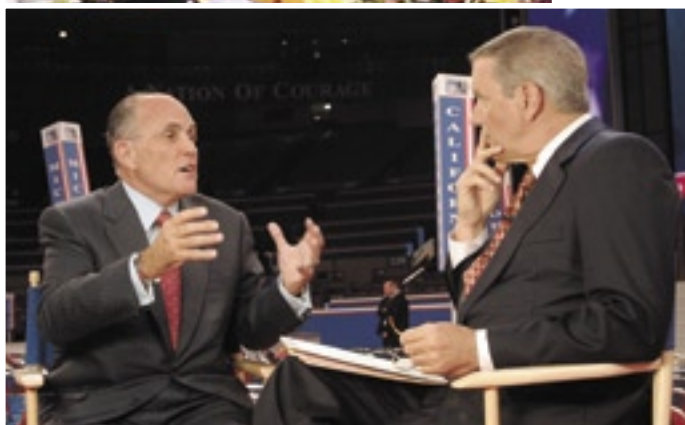
He has interviewed world leaders—presidents, prime ministers, premiers. He has reported on conflicts in Bosnia and the Middle East. He broadcast from the White House in 1993 when Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization signed their peace agreement.

A list of his interview subjects is a Who’s Who of national and international politics. In addition to interviewing each of the past six U.S. presidents, he has interviewed Tony Blair, Boris Yeltsin, Nelson Mandela, Yasir Arafat and dozens of others. He adds to that list almost daily. He says the key to a

good interview is “to find the little something on the subject that you’re discussing that will be illuminating to the audience and will perhaps tell them a little something different than what they’ve heard before.”

## The Changing Role of an Anchor

Recently, the ubiquitous Gibson has been filling several roles to give the ABC audience and his employers what they want. The week we spoke, he had just returned from covering Super Bowl XL in Detroit after being in Washington for the State of the Union address, doing double duty for *Good Morning America* and *World News Tonight* in what he says is “now unfortunately a regular schedule.”



‘No, I’m busy Tuesday night, I can’t do World News.’ There but for the grace of God go any one of us, and so you must do it. The press is writing some nice things. But it’s just what you do. You want to make sure that everybody understands the show is the important thing. The show will go on, and we’ll cover the news.”

Gibson realizes how important a sense of continuity is for ABC News viewers. “The audience is understandably confused,” he says, about “who’s going to be where when. They don’t keep a chart. They tune in and they want to see the people they’re used to seeing, but it’s just going to be disruptive for a while until [Woodruff] gets back, and then we’ll figure out what to do.”

He also realizes how fierce the competition is for that audience among the networks, and what role he plays in that race. “News departments ac-

quire reputations that transcend the individuals who are involved. There was a lot written about loyalties to Brokaw, Rather and Jennings. But I think, and I could be proven wrong, that there’s sort of an intuitive sense about the news department as a whole. Networks and stations acquire a certain reputation that tends to carry through. Now you can lose it rather easily. Acquiring a different reputation, a better reputation, is devilishly more difficult than losing your good reputation.”

### Learning Experiences

It’s a lot of responsibility and a long ways from the day he fed the gorilla, and from the days he “sort of” gave himself the title of news director of WPRB-FM, the student radio station at Princeton “because I was willing to go in and do newscasts when nobody else was.” He recalled the staff boasted the campus station had a potential listening audience of 12 million, “but, basically, the only people listening were our roommates where the station was so strong coming in that you could probably get it on your electric razor.”

He’s had little rest in a grueling position that began largely when Peter Jennings went off the air in April 2005. In Rome covering the funeral of Pope John Paul II when the announcement was made, Gibson says ABC News president David Westin contacted him to ask if he could help anchor World News Tonight. For Gibson, there was only one answer. “I said, ‘Of course.’ David and I talked about it at the time. We were doing the show for three audiences. One was the general number of people who watch around the country. A terribly important audience, I thought, was the staff, internally, at ABC. Peter was the sun around which we all revolved, but we would be OK. The necessity of showing stability was important, so that was the second audience. And the third audience was one person, Peter.”

He considers the current situation at World News Tonight, with recently named co-anchor Woodruff seriously injured by a roadside bomb in Iraq, as “the same thing.

“We’ve got somebody in critical condition,” he says. “You don’t say,

Gibson was not a journalism student and agrees “totally” with longtime ABC colleague Ted Koppel, who ruffled some feathers at the 1987 RTNDA convention when he said a person does not need to go to journalism school to be a journalist.

Gibson tells students, “If you want to go to journalism school, it’s not going to hurt you. And you’ll learn a lot about the business and how it works. I don’t think it’s not valuable. I just don’t think it’s the most valuable.”

The most valuable learning experience for a fledgling journalist, he says, is doing it. “If you come out of a liberal arts education knowing how to write, which is the single most important thing you can learn—to learn to be curious and how to ask questions—and if you come out with a pretty good moral compass, those are all the critical attributes of a good journalist,” he says.

But Gibson worries that “there are an awful lot of people coming into the business because they want to be on television, and they want people to recognize their face and know them.” He admits those things might be byproducts of being a journalist, but it should not be the main reason for going into the business.

### Following Your Heart

His first paying job in broadcasting was as a Washington producer for the RKO Network. He later became news director for WLVA-TV/AM in Lynchburg, VA, before moving to WJLA-TV (then WMAL-TV) in Washington as an anchor and reporter. From there he went to TVN and, two years later, to ABC, where he reached his goal of being one of the 120.

It was a payoff for years of persistence. But he remembers when he almost abandoned the whole idea of becoming one of the 120 and all the things that distinction has brought him.

About the time he turned 30, Gibson wondered, as many people do at that age, whether he was on the right course with his life. He was at the University of Michigan with a journalism fellowship when he asked his wife, Arlene, one day, “Should I go back to law school? I’m probably never going to hit it in this business and I’m probably never going



**REPORTING FROM...**  
Gibson's assignments for ABC News have taken him around the world, shown here in the Persian Gulf, Moscow and Rome, and aboard the USS Intrepid.

to make a lot of money. Would you be happier if I went back to law school and became a lawyer?"

She asked the crucial question: "What do you love?"

"I love this," he answered.

The discussion prompted him to begin comparing the work of a lawyer with that of a journalist. He says working on one project for a year or more, taking depositions on the same issue day after day "would bore me to tears."

But reporting! "It's always new. Every single day, it's new. It's always different and you will always be learning something. We are blessed in this business, a lot of us, to essentially go out and learn something about any subject that we can sell to our editors. If that doesn't get your juices flowing, I can't imagine what would," he says.

"You can't do it because you want to get rich and you can't do it because you like to be on television or see your name

at the top of a masthead. You have to do it because you really want to know what's going on, you want to be the first to know, and you want to be the person who lets other people know.

In 1957, the second winner of the Paul White Award, Frank Stanton, remembered White as "above all, a first-rate professional.

"He knew his business and respected it and believed in it—heart and soul."

RTNDA will present the Paul White Award for the 50th time on April 24, 2006. The name added to the silver bowl will be that of a first-rate professional

who loves his business, respects it and believes in it, heart and soul: Charles Gibson.—Bob Priddy is news director of Missouri in Jefferson City, MO, and former chairman of RTNDA. He interviewed Charles Gibson via telephone on February 9, 2006.

## RTNDA@NAB

April 23–26, 2006  
Las Vegas Hilton

Meet Charles Gibson on April 24 at the Paul White Award Dinner.

[www.rtna.org/convention](http://www.rtna.org/convention)