

## DeAnn Heline writes, produces 'The Middle'

By Rodney Richey, Herald Bulletin Feature Writer

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— LOS ANGELES — For DeAnn Heline, producing ABC's "The Middle," a situation comedy based in central Indiana, was not a huge stretch.

Born in 1965 in Muncie, Heline and her family moved to Cincinnati when she was 3, but she visited her Hoosier grandparents often.

So when Heline and her writing partner, Chicago's Eileen Heisler, who were roommates at Indiana University, were preparing to pitch a series idea to Warner Bros., the source material was familiar.

"We began talking about a family show, because we wanted to do something for ABC, and at that time, it had really gone away from its roots, which was family comedy," Heline said during a phone interview.

"My partner and I are both moms, tired moms. So we began talking about what it's like to be a tired mom."

The result was "The Middle," about a struggling but loving family in the fictional town of Orson, Ind.

The two, who have won Humanitas Prize for their work, had experience to bring to the idea, not just from their personal lives, but also from their careers: They had been writers on the often raucous set of "Roseanne."

"We also harkened back to those days, when we were writing about people in the middle of the country," Heline said. "And it felt like it wasn't that way anymore. People were setting sitcoms on the coasts, and there are so many people that we know and love, so many funny people from the Midwest."

Heline and Heisler, who attended New York University's Tisch School together, had experience writing for such sitcoms as "Doogie Howser, M.D.," "Ellen," "Murphy Brown" and "How I Met Your Mother."

"The Middle," though, has been their show from the ground up, with a dream cast and attributes any Hoosier would recognize, Heline added.

"I guess one of the things for us was to include the truthfulness, being very direct and very honest. I think, in L.A., people tend to say, 'Anyone will take a meeting with you,' even if there's not a job. It's all sort of B.S., you know."

"We have an episode coming up — I think it's the first one after the pilot — in which the character says, 'Here in the middle, people just say it as it is. There's no B.S.' Then we cut to the husband saying, 'You know, you're not fat, but that skirt sure makes you look fat.'"

The husband and wife at the center of the story are Mike and Frankie, played by Chicago's Neil Flynn, the anonymous janitor from "Scrubs," and Emmy Award winner Patricia Heaton ("Everybody Loves Raymond"). Their children include a teenage son named after another prominent Hoosier, rocker Axl Rose.

"We knew that Frankie would be the hardest part (to cast)," Heline said. "It was tricky, because it had to be someone who you could rest a whole show on her shoulders. And there's really very few people who can do that."

Heaton, a native of Ohio, was at first busy with another sitcom. When "Back to You," which co-starred Kelsey Grammer, stalled after only a few episodes, Heaton was on board.

Heline confessed the husband character was based on her grandfather from Muncie.

"In the pilot, one of the last lines Mike has is one where he says, 'I told you I loved you the day I married you. If anything had changed, I'd have let you know.' That was a real line from my grandpa."

Helene lives in the Los Angeles area with her husband, Bruce Bolkin, a publishing executive, and their two daughters.

Last December, Helene visited relatives in Zionsville for the holidays. One thing struck the native Hoosier: Everyone was nice, as opposed to the social minefield of Los Angeles.

Appropriately, Helene and Heisler ended up hiring many cast and crew from the Midwest, sometimes without realizing it.

“It’s funny, because our director on the pilot episode, Julie Anne Robinson, is actually British,” Helene said.

“But she has family and spent a lot of time in Illinois. So she’s always saying, in this British accent, ‘I’m a Midwesterner, too!’”

### **‘The Middle’**

What: ABC sitcom starring Patricia Heaton (“Everybody Loves Raymond”)

Also starring: Neil Flynn, Chris Kattan, Brian Doyle-Murray

When: 8:30 p.m. Wednesdays

Where: WRTV (Channel 6)

Information: <http://abc.go.com/shows/the-middle>

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### Photos



THE MIDDLE - Emmy-winner Patricia Heaton stars in this warm and witty single-camera comedy about raising a family and lowering your expectations. "The Middle" stars Patricia Heaton as Frankie, Neil Flynn as Mike, Charlie McDermott as Axl, Eden Sher as Sue, Atticus Shaffer as Brick and Chris Kattan as Bob. (ABC/RICHARD FOREMAN) NEIL FLYNN, PATRICIA HEATON, EDEN SHER, ATTICUS SHAFFER, CHARLES MCDERMOTT Associated Press



2009 SUMMER PRESS TOUR - Saturday, August 8, 2009 - The cast and executive producers of "The Middle" address the press at Disney-ABC Television Group's 2009 Summer Press Tour at The Langham, Huntington Hotel & Spa in Pasadena, California. (ABC/CRAIG SJODIN) DEANN HELINE The Herald Bulletin



**THE MIDDLE** - Emmy-winner Patricia Heaton stars in this warm and witty single-camera comedy about raising a family and lowering your expectations. "The Middle" stars Patricia Heaton as Frankie, Neil Flynn as Mike, Charlie McDermott as Axl, Eden Sher as Sue, Atticus Shaffer as Brick and Chris Kattan as Bob. (ABC/CRAIG SJODIN) NEIL FLYNN, EDEN SHER, PATRICIA HEATON, CHARLIE MCDERMOTT, ATTICUS SHAFFER The Herald Bulletin