

On the Radio

WNTK celebrates 20 years of broadcasting

BY *Wendi Dowst*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY *Marty McAuliff*

When Steve Smith was a Cub Scout, he toured WCNL's radio station. Now he sits at the microphone in the studio, welcoming listeners to the country music station. "I wouldn't be in radio if not for WCNL," says Smith.

WCNL's community involvement two decades ago was what first stirred Smith's interest in radio. That community involvement is what Smith says still makes Bob and Sheila Vinikoor's stations unique.

Vinikoor's association of stations, Koor Communications, comprises four sta-

tions: WNTK-FM 99.7 (Talk Radio), WCNL-AM Country 1010, WCFR-AM 1480 (Springfield, Vt.) and WUVR AM 1490 (Upper Valley). WNTK Talk Radio celebrated its 20th anniversary in August, making it the longest currently running radio station under single independent ownership in the state. Vinikoor says the localized, independent spirit is the greatest asset to the business and the best thing they



Steve Smith in the studio for WCNL's "Workforce Wake-Up" program

can provide to their listeners.

From hobby to record holder

Radio has been Bob Vinikoor's passion for the last 50 years. He started as an amateur radio operator, collecting old radios and creating his own programs when he was 12 years old.

The Vinikoors have lived in the Upper Valley for more than 35 years. Bob grew up in Washington, D.C., and met his wife, Sheila, right after college

in New Jersey. They have always been involved in business and communications. In the 1970s, Bob worked on the Veterans Affairs hospital's two-way network connecting community hospitals. Bob and Sheila later co-owned Satellite Video in White River Junction, Vt., for five years. They purchased WNTK in May 1988 and started airing in September. "We had to redo the station," Bob says. "When

we purchased it, it was 250 watts in a house in Newport.” In 1992 they added WNTK’s FM station.

“That certainly makes them the longest, locally owned commercial radio station among New Hampshire’s current lineup,” says Ed Brouder, associate director of the New Hampshire Association of Broadcasters. “The Vinikoor’s certainly hold the record since the broadcast industry was deregulated.” There have been, in the past, longer ownership spans such as Frank Estes’ ownership of WKXL-AM in Concord from 1957-1980.

The couple co-owns and operates the business and, as Bob puts it, they “do a little bit of everything. Sheila runs the business office and I run the street operations, so to speak. It’s been 20 years. It’s a great community to live and work in. We really appreciate the support.”

Always on

In the front office of WNTK’s New London station, one wall is plastered with candidate bumper stickers ranging from Jeanne Shaheen to Bob Dole, John Kerry to Steve Forbes, George W. Bush to Howard Dean. A world map covers the second wall, and yet another wall is covered with photographs of Dr. Joy Brown, Bill Clinton and the music group, the Four Bitching Babes. Clearly, musical and political loyalties at the station remain loose, allowing WNTK to adapt whenever change is needed.

In 1988, WNTK was one of Rush Limbaugh’s first affiliates. But when the national conglomerate

Clear Channel Communications, Inc. bought Premiere in 2000, Clear Channel refused to syndicate “The Rush Limbaugh Show” to any competing stations, including WNTK. The audience noticed.

“If we make a business change

— hire a new host — the minute we make the change the public knows and they call in,” Vinikoor says. “The job is literally 24-7... we are always broadcasting. Everything we do is public.”

Vinikoor filled the Rush Limbaugh void with local, liberal radio talk show host Deborah “Arnie” Arnesen. “So we brought in Rush’s antithesis,” Vinikoor says. “If that’s the way you want to play ball, then I’ll give you Arnie.”

The station has since switched back to the conservative side, bringing in “The O’Reilly Factor.” But not before the change to Arnesen’s program

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created publicity for the stations.

“Getting Rush in 1988 was great, but losing him was even better,” Vinikoor says. “It brought us local and sold more advertising.”

Locally focused and operated radio stations are an endangered species,



almost attuned to a different time and place. Aside from the traditional information and entertainment, local radio enables communication, emergency assistance and fundraising. When New Hampshire radio host Pauline Robbins was diagnosed with cancer, WNTK participated in a radiothon that raised \$41,000 for cancer research, and the station collected presents for the Thomas family of Newport when their home burned over Christmas.

During the ice storm of 1998 when much of New London was without power for nearly a week, then-Governor Jeanne Shaheen arrived by helicopter for an interview on WNTK. The station was running on space heaters and generators. “Everyone clicked into another mode,” Vinikoor recalls.

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“It is high energy when everyone comes together.”

Mentoring future radio personalities

Two decades after Steve Smith first toured the Newport station as a Cub Scout, he now sits in the broadcast booth like a one-man band, switching between the newswire, the music list and the microphone. Broadcasting country music and local information, Smith runs WCNL’s “Workforce Wake-Up” program from 5:30 to 10 a.m. five mornings a week.

During his 11 years in radio, Smith has broadcast everything from rock to country. He says “Workforce Wake-Up” leans more toward country, 1980s and earlier. Personally, he enjoys everything from Garth Brooks to punk rock and avoids



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being tied down to a favorite. “I’m a music guy; I love it all,” Smith says. “We have a unique mixture — by design. We’re trying to combat the repetition of popular music.”

After living and working in other areas, Smith wants his local station to focus on his home. “Newport and Claremont are often forgotten. The mill towns get forgotten and I am from here — I have a fondness for the area,” Smith says. “I want to spotlight the good things in town. Good things happen here.”

Smith says the focus on local information and local music tastes combats the competition — and the large radio stations are the least of his worries. “I worry about kids and their iPods,” Smith says. “We have to give people compelling content, and people do care about the local ham and bean dinner.”

One way Smith keeps “Workforce Wake-Up” local is by mentoring high school students. At the beginning of the year, Smith started teaching a handful of Newport High School students how to broadcast, and they now have their own weekly air slot, “Tiger Talk.” It’s not Cub Scouts but, perhaps in a decade, one of those students will be broadcasting local information. In the meantime, Drew Galbraith kicks off the weekend with “Saturday Sports Talk”, Ross Gott follows the sports hour with a finance program, and Bridget LeRoy and Janine Weins broadcast “Twin State Journal” for an hour each weekday evening.

Online globally, focused locally

Dave Morgan has been working at WNTK since it first started airing 20 years ago. He is the operations manager, and among his many roles, he operates the board and records commercials. "I even empty trash at the end of the night," Morgan says.

Morgan has seen many changes at the station over the years, but the most significant change has been in their technology. "When I first got here we were still using the old reel-to-reel

decks. You had to splice the tape if you wanted to make a change in a commercial," he says.

Today, Bob and Sheila Vinikoor's stations all stream online, and he is considering podcasting and broadcasting over cell phones. "When we started we weren't competing with satellite, Internet, iPods," says Bob. "With all the other resources for music, we remain steadfast news talk radio. We've made changes in technology and in format, but it is always local talk radio."

Wendi Dowst, a Sunapee native, has freelanced for New Hampshire Public Radio, Eagle Times, Guardian Unlimited and the PBS affiliate, WCNY.

Marty McAuliff is a freelance photographer living in Andover, where he can be found obsessing over the tonal capabilities of Fuji Velvia and trying to coax moose from the woods by means of transcendental meditation.

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