Your kids might holler when “that old music” blasts from your favorite radio station, and you might have had it with the mysterious phenomenon that makes the volume of commercials seem so darn loud.

But don’t touch that dial. You may be missing the best part of radio – its personalities.

Each generation has had its own radio personality – or disc jockey as they once were called when vinyl was king – who gave us a reason to tune in and become loyal listeners. Alan Freed, Wolfman Jack, Casey Kasem and Howard Stern often seemed bigger than the music they were playing or the guests they were interviewing.

However, with so many commercial-free and user-specific options available such as MP3 players, the internet and satellite radio, creating loyalty among listeners is no easy task.

But for five Northwest alumni – Sharon Cross Bonnett ’65, Brent Harmon ’75, Mike Railsback ’80, Rob DeBolt ’88 and Karen Browning Gruender ’96 – radio is their passion. Their enthusiasm is contagious, their delivery is smooth and their interest in their local communities is refreshing. This is why they’re the talk of the town.
Rob DeBolt ‘88

AKA: “Carson” and “Rob Carson”
Tune in: 3-7 p.m., WROX Mix 107.3 FM, Washington, D.C.
Format: Hot Adult Contemporary

“There are two types of people in broadcasting: those who are egotistical and need to let everyone know who they are, and those who have esteem problems and need to be built up. I fall somewhere in between the two.”

Why the name “Carson”? I always knew I wanted to be an entertainer, and I grew up just 11 miles from Johnny Carson’s hometown of Norfolk, Neb.

Where do you get your drive to succeed? Growing up I did farm work, was a frycook and cleaned sludge from giant petroleum tanks. Because of that background, I’ve busted my tail to make sure I didn’t have a career making minimum wage. I’m very fortunate to have a beautiful wife, two beautiful and healthy kids and to work in radio, doing what I love.

Any life-changing experiences? I had a heart attack when I was 32 years old. I was in great shape, but I had a lot of stress in my life. I was the only guy in cardiac rehab under 70. It made me realize I had to try all of the things in life that I was previously afraid to do, like stand-up comedy, and to not take anything for granted.

Signs of early success? A year out of college I was doing the morning show at a station in Columbia and heard about a guy named Rush Limbaugh who had started a nationally syndicated radio show. Just a few years later I sold some of my comedy bits to him, and by age 25 I was mentioned in his bestselling book. I still write for him – a lot of pop culture parity and political satire.

What’s your future hold? Some day I’d like to get a TV show on HGTV or TLC incorporating two of my interests – home improvement and gourmet cooking. I also see myself doing a morning radio show or segueing into talk radio full time.

How did Northwest prepare you for your career? Sharon Bonnett at KXCV really took me under her wing, and I still consider her my broadcast mom. Other than the broadcast courses, a poetry class helped me the most. It taught economy of expression. Brevity is the soul of wit.

Karen, when did you realize you wanted to enter this field? I always was the entertainer type and mimicked commercials as a kid. I really had fun in the radio classes at Northwest, and the creativity it provided was a great outlet.

Mike, as an agribusiness major at Northwest, how did you get into broadcasting? After graduation I worked for Allis-Chalmers farm equipment, but farming was brutal in the early 1980s. I learned about a job opening for a farm reporter at a station in St. Joseph. They liked my ag background and said they could teach me the broadcasting part of the job. I don’t do farm reports anymore – just traffic. It’s a split shift, so I have the middle of the day off. I guess I should look into delivering pizzas or the phone book in my spare time.

Karen, how do you sound chipper so early in the morning? Sometimes it’s hard to sound upbeat, considering I have a 1- and a 2-year-old at home, and I have to get up at 2 a.m. every day for work. There certainly have been times when I’ve had to draw upon my theatre minor. But when we’re on the air, all of us on the “Morning Crew” know our listeners are counting on us to get them going in the morning. As soon as we’re on the air, the adrenaline flows.

Mike, what makes the “Morning Crew” have such a great rapport? We all like what we do and know how to think on our feet, plus, Karen and I have similar backgrounds. We were both raised on a farm, we both graduated from Northwest and we both met our spouses at Northwest. (Mike married Linda Orr ’80, and Karen married David Gruender ’96.) And we both agree, you can’t beat Pagliai’s pizza.

“Doing airborne traffic comes easy for me, but I think the real reason I got the job was because I didn’t get air sick and I was willing to risk my life riding with young pilots who make just $9 an hour. Actually it’s very safe, but we’ve had a few close calls, so it’s probably a good thing they taught me how to land the plane – just in case.” – Mike Railsback
You’ve been a broadcaster for 29 years. How have things changed? When I first started, we were cueing up 45 RPM vinyl records. With today’s technology, everything is point and click. The digital age has made people a lot more song-oriented instead of band-oriented. The listener’s interest in who wrote the song and what label it was recorded on is now lost. People even call in to the station and request a certain number on a CD instead of the song title. They don’t realize I don’t have the actual CD in hand. Everything is downloaded from various services now. Thankfully, the relationship with the listeners hasn’t changed. It’s still me talking to you.

Are your listeners surprised you don’t fit the “look” of country music? Although I like the music, especially the old stuff, I’m often told I don’t look like a country guy. The anonymity is one of the things I like about radio. I listen to all kinds of music. I think the first time I saw the Rolling Stones in concert was when I was in college, and I saw them again this year.

What are some of your hobbies? My wife and I enjoy tennis, live music and traveling, and I’ve always been interested in clothes. I remember when I was at Northwest I took a trip to England and bought silver platform shoes with stars and 4-inch wooden heels. I actually wore them around campus. I’m sure other students thought I was from outer space. I still have them, but looking back now, that was sure weird!

Bonnett leaves lasting legacy at KXCV

Since 1971, KXCV has been the public radio voice of Northwest. For all but the station’s first year, Sharon Cross Bonnett ’65 has served the station in such roles as community service coordinator, program director and, since 1985, general manager. Bonnett retired in June after 34 years of service, but her passion for public broadcasting will continue to impact listeners and future generations of student broadcasters.

During her tenure, Bonnett expanded the station’s coverage area with a repeater station, KRNW, in Chillicothe, provided audio reader services for the visually impaired and launched the Bearcat Radio Network. She also oversaw the installation of a new tower and a digital conversion project to provide digital broadcasting to the area.

“My avocation and my vocation have been one in the same,” she said. “I’ve had many great years at KXCV, and I’ve learned from two great mentors – Cathran Cushman and Rollie Stadlman. I’m proud to have continued the dual mission of student training and public radio service.”

Bonnett said she corresponds with about 200 alumni on a regular basis and looks forward to visiting many of them in their work environment now that she has more time for travel.

“We’ve accomplished a lot at KXCV over the years, but what gives me the most joy is my relationship with students,” Bonnett said. “The students are my children – even after they graduate – and I enjoy interacting with them and seeing them become productive members of society.”