Talk of the Town

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.

Written by Mitzi Lutz
Photography by Darren Whitley
Design by Melinda Kelsey
Karen Browning Gruender ’96

AKA: “Karen Carson” and “KC”
Tune in: 5:30-10 a.m., WDAF 106.5 FM, Kansas City
Format: Country

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 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 Paglia’s pizza.

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, KRWV, 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.

“AVC Announcer and my vocations have been one in the same,” she said. “I’ve had many great years at KXCV, and I’ve learned from two great mentors – Cathryn Cushman and Rollie Stadman. 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.”

Karen married David Gruender ’96. (And we both agree, you can’t beat Paglia’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 young pilots who make just $9 an hour. Actually it’s very young pilots who make just $9 an hour. Actually it’s very young pilots who make just $9 an hour. Actually it’s very young pilots who make just $9 an hour. Actually it’s very young pilots who make just $9 an hour. Actually it’s very young pilots who make just $9 an hour. Actually it’s very young pilots who make just $9 an hour. Actually it’s very young pilots who make just $9 an hour. Actually it’s very young pilots who make just $9 an hour. Actually it’s very young pilots who make just $9 an hour. Actually it’s very young pilots who make just $9 an hour. Actually it’s very young pilots who make just $9 an hour. Actually it’s very young pilots who make just $9 an hour. Actually it’s very young pilots who make just $9 an hour. Actually it’s very young pilots who make just $9 an hour. Actually it’s very young pilots who make just $9 an hour. Actually it’s very young pilots who make just $9 an hour. Actually it’s very young pilots who make just $9 an hour. Actually it’s very young pilots who make just $9 an hour. Actually it’s very young pilots who make just $9 an hour.

Mike Railsback ’80

AKA: “Sky Spy”
Tune in: 6-9 a.m., 4-6 p.m., WDAF 106.5 FM, Kansas City
Format: Country / Airborne traffic reports

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Mike, what makes the “Morning Crew” have such 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 Paglia’s pizza.

You’ve been a broadcaster for 29 years. How have things changed? When I first started, we were cuing up 49 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.

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What are some of your hobbies? My wife and I enjoy tennis, five 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!

Brent Harmon ’75

AKA: “Brother B”
Tune in: 10 a.m.-3 p.m., KSJO 92.7 FM, St. Joseph
Format: Country

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