

# INSIDE RADIO®

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“Personalities INSIDE RADIO”

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## TALK RADIO ZEAL COMES FROM BOYCE'S HEART

by Mike Kinosian, Special Features Editor

Some are partial to insisting that “when one door closes – another one opens” while others favor the “making lemonade from lemons” adage.

Either way, it's the same thrust: Seemingly the worst thing that could happen in one's professional life has a bizarre tendency to wind up having an eerily positive conclusion.

In an all-too-familiar scenario, budget cuts translated into widespread job losses and one particularly sharp young broadcaster was among the casualties.

This instance didn't happen recently but 18 years ago and consequently enabled Denver News Director *Phil Boyce* to transition to a fabled top ten market facility's programming chair and, in turn, advanced to another tremendous podium in America's largest market.

### Masterfully Meritorious Service

After a 14-year WABC/New York PD stint, Boyce last November hooked up with Talk Radio Network as President/Programming. “I met [TRN CEO] Mark [Masters] nine years ago when he began launching Michael Savage,” Boyce points out. “We talked shop and I realized he's a smart guy. I was drawn [to Masters because] he's a fierce entrepreneur with a drive to succeed like no one I've ever seen.”

Undoubtedly there was mutual respect since a standing job offer existed for Boyce to join TRN whenever he wanted and he acknowledges, “Very few people have that kind of safety blanket.”

As the two became friends, Masters shared things with Boyce that the then-WABC Program Director considered helpful in his syndication efforts. “I actually learned the syndication game from Mark, even though he was a competitor,” Boyce explains. “I always worked at a radio station but was also a syndicator.”

Afforded the best of both worlds Boyce controlled his own shows through 50,000-watt New York City flamethrower WABC where he incubated new talent. “I watched [Mark Masters] grow his company and marveled at how he could get shows on 300 stations,” Boyce states. “He didn't own stations, have a news network or Paul Harvey. I admired that he [simply] had shows with merit.”

### Mile High To Motown

As five-year-old Phil Boyce was passing by tiny KUSH-AM on Cushing, OK's outskirts, he asked his father how the station's signal penetrated into the car radio.

Curiosity in the medium blossomed from there and at age 14, he landed his first radio job at 1,000-watt Pueblo, CO AM daytime Gospel outlet KFEL. “Pueblo was a great place to get started,” Boyce points out. “There were 11 AMs in a city of about 100,000. While I was there, FM came along and opportunities almost doubled overnight. We made minimum wage but for a high school kid, it sure beat flipping hamburgers. I was driving a station's news car while I was still in high school. It was fabulous back then.”

Progressing to Oklahoma City, Boyce eventually made his way to Denver and prominent “Mile High” stations KIMN and KHOW although in 1991 KHOW's “high priced” News Director was no longer needed. “I figured I'd never work in radio again,” admits Boyce who credits Lee Larsen as being a tremendous friend/mentor. “On two occasions, he came close to hiring me as [KOA/Denver's PD]. He let me down easy the second time by saying I could program any Talk station in the country and if I ever needed it, he'd give me [his help].”

Six months after that gracious offer, Boyce contacted Larsen who was already aware of what transpired at KHOW. “He recommended me to ABC President Don Bouloukos who needed a Program Director at WJR/Detroit,” recounts Boyce who was on a plane to Detroit the next day. “[WJR] was in ratings decline for five straight years but was still #1 in the #6 market [Detroit's now market #11]. For some strange reason, it was decided I could fix it and was given my first real programming shot. It was thrilling but also scary as hell. I didn't know if I could do it. My second book was a 9.3, followed by [another 9.3] and we were off to the races.”

During his four-year WJR tenure, Boyce gradually converted the Full-Service AC to Talk. “I got [to Detroit] in February 1991 and it was frankly in a state of recession then,” Boyce recounts. “You don't see the sun there from November to April [and it wasn't] a very inviting place.”

Instead of experiencing a vibrant downtown Boyce witnessed

people warming their hands over burning trash cans; however he learned to love the Motor City because “It’s an overgrown small town. WJR [are] great call letters that [get] you in the door.”

### Battle of the Boards

Any programmer would have salivated at having morning driver J.P. McCarthy which is exactly what Boyce inherited and he candidly proclaims, “Without him, we couldn’t have made the conversion as successfully as we did. He gradually played less music, did more interviews and was Detroit’s morning show of record. If you were ‘anybody’ in that town, you’d be on his show. As long as J.P. was there, we had a built-in audience.”

Just as it does today, WJR was locked in a fierce competitive struggle with cross-town all-News WWJ. “The first billboard I saw when I got out of the airport was ‘WJR – Great Voice of the Great Lakes,’” Boyce remembers. “The next one was for WWJ - ‘traffic and weather on the eights.’ WJR’s billboards were nice but didn’t explain the station [whereas the WWJ boards] gave a very clear benefit. I realized WWJ was taking away WJR’s traffic image. We had a real rock and roll-style AM battle for supremacy.”

Delighted with what Boyce accomplished at WJR, Bouloukos asked for a repeat performance when he required someone to program WABC. “I had the same feeling [about being scared] there and didn’t know if I could make it,” Boyce concedes. “I’d wake up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat but after about nine months, I realized I could do it.”

Approximately one year into the job, he blew up the station by firing Bob Grant for insensitive comments the talk host made about Commerce Secretary Ron Brown who died in a plane crash. “We had to build [WABC] around Rush Limbaugh,” Boyce points out. “I knew it would take at least five years [but] didn’t say that because [not many] companies will give you five years to rebuild anything.”

Ability to identify great talent and placing them in a conducive environment is among Boyce’s greatest strengths. “I’m the guy who gave Sean Hannity his shot in New York,” he asserts. “I convinced him to syndicate when he didn’t think it was a great idea. He wanted to be #1 in New York and didn’t want to change his show. I had to convince him his show wouldn’t change and he could be #1 in New York – and everywhere else. I didn’t know it

would become America’s second most-listened to show.” Within two years, the program which spun-off from WABC began billing more than WABC, thus becoming grander than the station that created him. “I wanted to put my talent on as many stations as possible,” Boyce explains. “If I didn’t, someone would steal them from me. Hannity was going to be syndicated [and] I wanted to be the guy [who did it]. I created a profit center for the company. By the time he’s done, Sean Hannity alone will put \$100 million of pure profit to the company’s bottom line.”

### Worker Without Compensation

Not many other such personalities are sitting on a tree waiting to be plucked. “I got lucky with [Hannity] and he became one of my best friends,” states Boyce who maintains regular contact with Hannity and also struck gold with radio novice Mark Levin. “He was a compelling, fire-breathing dragon who appeared on Fox News Channel during the Clinton impeachment. I put him on Sundays, Noon-2pm.”

One slight hiccup though was involved in that hiring process since Boyce didn’t have any money budgeted for a weekender. “I told Mark I had good news and bad news. I was giving him [a job] but couldn’t pay him. I said he could do it for several months to see if he liked it and was sure I could [eventually compensate him].”

Amazingly that gratis arrangement lasted for 14 months until WABC ran into an issue with Michael Savage. “We had to let him go because of a contract dispute he was having [with our San Francisco sister station],” Boyce notes. “He jumped ship and went to [cross-town Buckley Talk] WOR. That’s the worst nightmare a PD can have. You create the monster and give it to the competition. I had to fill that hole and knew Mark could do it [although] he wasn’t that good when he started.”

It underscored the need for stations to have a deep bench. “There’s great talent in the top 20 markets and then there’s a drop-off,” Boyce maintains. “Frankly many syndicated shows aren’t very good. There will be a whittling out process in the next year or so and shows will fall by the wayside. It’s very difficult to find great talent because we’ve eliminated the farm team. It’s our own fault but there isn’t enough money to put a host on the weekend and let [him or her] grow into a star.”

Another industry newcomer Boyce took a chance on was frequent

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Hannity guest Matt Drudge who became the first show host Boyce syndicated from WABC. “It happened right after [Drudge] broke the Monica Lewinsky scandal. He was a Talk radio fan but never did his own show. We instantly got him on 200 stations, Sunday nights at 9pm.”

### **Puzzle Pieced Together**

Programmers are discovering Talk radio’s potent PPM world performance and Boyce maintains electronic measurement is a much more accurate way to gauge listening. “I always thought the diary system was flawed. [WABC] Promotion Director Johnny Donovan convinced me that we should constantly promote the lineup. We did that long before PPM got there.”

Different shows were always linked together in promos as Boyce created a jigsaw puzzle. “I wanted different pieces yet somehow connected together so when you stood back and looked, it made sense,” he explains. “I didn’t want a checkerboard where pieces didn’t fit. What I accomplished was a massive TSL machine that drove listening. People were addicted to the station and it became their place to be. That to me is how to build a great radio station – it works.”

Likening his WABC work experience to being strapped on the nosecone of an F-14 fighter flying to a battle zone, Boyce states, “We felt we were right in the thick of things. I deal with many rookie programmers who either come from music or [outside the business]. They don’t know how to do Talk radio the right way. If they’ll listen, I’ll teach them.”

Somewhat fearful he’d miss a radio station’s day-to-day excitement Boyce is now quite comfortable working from his New Jersey home office. “Instead of having to watch out for one great radio station, I have about 800,” he comments. “I thought about [relocating to TRN’s Oregon headquarters but] Mark really needed someone here to do business and put out fires. I have great hosts to manage like I did before but I also have the added responsibility of making sure they all get carried on as many stations as possible. Affiliation is hard work [but] it’s also very rewarding when you finally land that station you’ve been trying so hard to score.”

Tremendously successful coaches or managers weren’t always the best players. Likewise superlative players don’t necessarily make good coaches or managers. “I couldn’t go on the air three hours a day and do what those guys do,” readily states Boyce, although he hosted a WABC “Ask the Program Director” segment every six months. “My gift is recognizing their gift. I groom talent; get them on the stage; and make sure they succeed.”

Ultra-familiar personalities Phil Hendrie, Mancow, Rusty Humphries, Jerry Doyle, Laura Ingraham, Monica Crowley and Savage are among those comprising TRN’s enviable roster. “It’s fun to help them succeed,” declares Boyce. “It’s why I get up in the morning.”

### **Ambitious Aspiration**

Arrival of mass quantities of FM talkers has supposedly been imminent but Boyce is adamant this is the year it happens.

Several music station-to-FM Talk conversions have transpired in the last few weeks alone and Boyce declares, “I’d be happy to be remembered as the guy who re-invented FM Talk. Doors that were closed a year ago are being opened. There’s a struggling FM in every market that – for whatever reason - has never caught on with its music format. The only way I’d be able to grow Mark’s company was by finding new real estate. We did and it’s beachfront property.”

Convinced the economy will soon turn around Boyce comments, “Those who remain will have a huge challenge as we try to rebuild radio and turn it into something we know it can be. I’m like a bottom-feeder looking for underperforming FMs that haven’t found their niche. They’re trying to keep their head above water. We’re going to save some stations that are in desperate straits. It’s a good time to be in syndication if you’re doing it the right way.”

When all is said and done, Boyce believes he’ll be able to convince approximately 100 stations to do FM Talk. “I can’t think of anything else that’s been more rewarding,” he remarks. “We’re in the middle of one of the most exciting growth opportunities [ever] for our company. [TRN] can do turnkey FM Talk stations because we have shows in virtually every day-part.”

With that in mind, thoughts about shifting gears have never crossed Boyce’s mind. “I’m happy to do this the rest of my life,” he notes with authority. “I’ve had a great run [but] I’m not done yet.”



**WHO: Phil Boyce**

**WHAT: President/Programming**

**WHERE: Talk Radio Network**

**WHEN: Since November 2008**