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“Personalities INSIDE RADIO”

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PROGRAMMER'S CONTAGIOUS CAN-DO SPIRIT

by Mike Kinosian, Special Features Editor

Rarely is job loss conveniently-timed.

Its sting however is especially excruciating when it coincides with the holidays.

Matters become exceedingly unsettled when the economy's extremely dubious nature is factored into the equation.

Awesome Arsenal

Distinguished programmer [Laurie Cantillo](#) nevertheless found herself unemployed at Thanksgiving.

That's also roughly when she discovered Citadel Talk WABC/New York's programming chair was vacant following Phil Boyce's departure.

After a brief bout of soul-searching to determine if she'd be up for a Big Apple move, Cantillo did indeed meet with WABC's management team and support staff. "I realized it would be a great fit," she remarks. "They are all tops in their field, highly professional people who live and breathe radio."

Whether it is morning personality extraordinaire Don Imus or his MSNBC ("Morning Joe") successor Joe Scarborough (10-11:45am); Rush Limbaugh (Noon-3pm) or Sean Hannity (3-6pm); Mark Levin (6-9pm) or Laura Ingraham (9-10pm), WABC boasts a legitimate all-star array of blockbuster talent, many of whom emanate their syndicated programs directly from WABC's studios. Therefore as Cantillo comments, "It's like having a local station with America's top talent. They all want to win and are certainly [open] to suggestions. It is a dynamic environment and I'm having a blast. I get in early; listen/give feedback; and meet with sales. I wouldn't say I'm re-imaging [WABC] as much as sharpening the station's branding."

Entering such a scenario could understandably cause one to be star-struck but former morning talent Cantillo isn't intimidated and relates to the VIP air staff she inherited three weeks ago (2-2-2009) in a way she'd like to be managed. "It helps that I've been on the air – certainly not at their level - but I have an appreciation of what they go through," she comments. "I know what it's like being hot-lined by a program director and I respect them tremendously."

World of Difference

One of those youngsters who'd listen to late-night Top 40 by way of

a sub-pillow transistor radio, Denver native Cantillo experimented to see how many different nationwide stations she could pick up. "I'd even call-in music requests and enter contests," she recounts. "Radio was a big part of my life."

Editor of her high school newspaper she was intrigued with The Washington Post's Bob Woodward & Carl Bernstein. "An informed public makes proper decisions [so] I wanted to major in Journalism [in college] and change the world," states Cantillo who took radio news-writing classes and did an internship at a local station. "I couldn't believe people were paid to do this. I loved covering stories and then hearing my work on the air."

Simultaneous with graduating from the University of Colorado, Cantillo landed a fulltime reporting job in Boulder and later spent several years in Madison as a morning anchor/reporter. "I had to [re-learn] a great deal of high school civics," she jokes. "I went back to Denver and thought the station I had to work for was KOA. I was one of the youngest employees [on-staff]. I began doing weekend news and within a short time was morning drive co-anchor."

Part of her 13-year KOA tenure included being Alan Berg's Noon news hour producer. "He'd say Talk radio was the last American neighborhood; in my mind, Alan was a real pioneer," Cantillo comments of the controversial host killed in 1984 by members of a white nationalist group and whose on-air style was the foundation for Eric Bogosian's 1987 "Talk Radio."

When KOA's then Program Director Robin Bertolucci (now performing similar duties at Clear Channel Talk facilities KFI & KTLK-AM/Los Angeles) went on maternity leave, Cantillo filled in on an interim basis. "Programming is what I was born to do," she reflects. "I love working with talent. I felt I could make my mark on a whole station and didn't want to [do anything else]. Talk radio is creative and can be so much fun."

Numerous skilled broadcasters have passed through KOA and the 50,000-watt "Blowtorch of the West" left a huge impression on Cantillo who maintains, "It really was like a big family. We would liven up the morning show with interviews. We'd also do studio bits that would make the journalist in me cringe yet I saw they worked. News was still highly respected and the numbers went up. That was very [enlightening] about how to lower the demo, especially with a heritage station."

Mountains & Snakes

Selected to program Talk KTAR/Phoenix in 1997, Cantillo spent nearly three years at the Arizona Diamondbacks flagship.

Rather than making sudden random changes she judiciously studied the market's dynamics. "I was brought there in part because of my news background but also because I'd been at KOA with the initiation of [MLB's Colorado Rockies]," Cantillo points out. "I understood how to bring baseball into the mix. I was there for the [Diamondbacks'] opening season."

Associated responsibilities with integrating baseball onto KTAR included taking advantage of new cume sampling the station. "We had to use [the Diamondbacks] as a way to convert 25-54s," she stresses. "I was very torn [about who to root for though] when [Colorado] played [Arizona]."

Success at KTAR led to Cantillo being recruited by cross-town KFYY in a similar capacity where she was handed a blank canvas. "I was told we'd never beat KTAR but [was asked to] try to narrow the gap."

Given considerable autonomy to bring in strong personalities Cantillo coaxed ("The Nearly Famous") Barry Young out of retirement. "People thought I was out of my mind [for hiring] Bruce Jacobs who was doing Sports talk [but] he was #1 [among 25-54s] in his first book," she explains. "We took many risks and within two years, we beat KTAR for the first time."

Some thought it was a fluke but as Cantillo points out, "We did it [repeatedly] and KFYY is now consistently number one. We were a band of renegades. So many [doubters] said we were taking on a heritage station [KTAR] which had the news image and sports franchise [but] we believed in ourselves. By golly, we did it. It was quite an accomplishment and I'm still very close to the people there."

Unforgettable Urging

A tidbit that former Jacor and Clear Channel honcho Randy Michaels (now Tribune COO) mentioned to Cantillo many years ago has lingered with her. "He said to always remember radio is [supposed to be] fun. You need to have fun in the hallways because it will spill into the studios. Randy is one of the smartest and most talented people in our industry - I learned a lot from him."

Gabe Hobbs was our Brand Manager when I was with KFYY and deserves much of the credit for our success. He taught me a great deal about creating the right subject matter for talk shows - I think the world of him and of Robin [Bertolucci]."

Always interested in "cracking the code" in terms of women's programming and female-targeted radio, Cantillo in 2006 scored a plum role as Program Director for "Oprah & Friends."

Happily working at KFYY, she was contacted by XM and asked if she wanted to help construct the new venture. "I interviewed with people at Harpo and a very short time later was packing my bags for Chicago," Cantillo recounts. "It was an honor to work with [John Gehron] who was my boss and one of the nicest human beings in radio. I can't believe how many people I cross paths with who've worked with him and all say the same thing."

Over the course of her approximately two-and-one-half-years programming "Oprah & Friends," Cantillo developed a stronger sense of what female listeners care about. "The core of most [Talk stations] is male [so] there's an area of opportunity to bring in some P2s and P3s," she opines. "You can cultivate P1 loyalty among women. That can be done with less confrontational style."

It then becomes a matter of finding compatible personalities who resonate. "[Oprah Winfrey] would come in [several] times a month generally to record a weekly, 30-minute show," Cantillo points out. "She'd also voice copy for us from time-to-time. I didn't get to spend a lot of time with her but the interaction was always very professional. She's a natural on the radio so she didn't need much coaching."

Notwithstanding the "fascinating" time she had programming the channel bearing the iconic daytime television personality's name Cantillo was among the satcaster's casualties and watches the plight of merged Sirius XM. "It saddens me because I worked with many talented people," she notes. "I respect what they've done and hope they can make the economics work. Quite honestly, I do not see [satellite] as a threat to terrestrial radio and I hope [it] survives. Many people are afraid to deviate from the tried-and-true [but] I appreciated the freedom to try new things. It's a good thing to encourage programmers to develop talent with more diverse viewpoints. Now more than ever, we have to think out-of-the-box."

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Big Picture Philosophy

Ability to locate and develop unique talent is one of Cantillo's greatest programming strengths yet WABC's current lineup would appear to be pretty firmly set with no gaping holes. "Our industry suffered [somewhat as many] people tried to sound like Rush rather than develop their own style," she maintains. "I'm a big fan of quirky personalities who can't be duplicated. I've always had this gift of being able to hear it. I'm also able to assess a market and see where the opening is and where we need to go."

Staying current is something Cantillo stresses to her on-air hosts because as she emphasizes, "Every second counts on the radio. You can't assume that just because people have loyalty and know who you are, they'll listen. It's all about content. I work with talent and producers to make sure [we always] sound crisp, relevant and relatable. We also have to send the right message to our audience about who we are and what we do. Branding is critical. Say who you are, be that and own it."

It is her contention Arbitron's Portable People Meter compels stations to relentlessly be razor-sharp. "That means pre-interviewing guests and making sure your subject matter is on-target," Cantillo suggests. "I'm not a [PPM] critic because I'm in favor of anything that helps us be better. We're not programming in a vacuum. People have many choices but, quite honestly, I'm more focused on other listening options - particularly new media - [than I am on cross-town Buckley Talk WOR]. I don't see this as a WABC-WOR battle. It's us versus television, iPod and podcasts. We have to look at the whole picture."

As far as Cantillo is concerned, the more voices in Talk radio – the better. "It's all about entertainment – not pushing certain agendas," she asserts. "You'll win by focusing on your listeners' needs. There can't be any other agenda beyond that. Gone are the days when stations were 'all things to all people.' We live in such an information-saturated world that we are actually disconnected from one another."

For many, Talk radio fills the role of supplying that bond. "People think radio is in all kinds of trouble but I'm an optimist [about the medium], whether it's delivered by a transmitter, the internet or on an iPhone," Cantillo stresses. "We still need people who are able to distill all the information out there and put it in perspective."

Author ADDED To Her Credits

During her capacity as KOA's medical reporter Cantillo wrote/voiced one-minute "Health Notes" and noticed many stories regarding Attention Deficit Disorder. "A physician suggested my oldest son had it," she points out. "I wondered why it was called a 'disorder' because I think he's a great kid. I put on my advocacy and medical reporter hats and decided it was time to talk about positive attributes of these children. Perhaps the problem wasn't as much with them as it is with the educational system that doesn't honor their learning style. I found out about a tutor [Jeffrey Freed] who achieved some amazing results."

After Freed worked with her son, Cantillo persuaded him to co-author "Right-Brained Children in a Left-Brained World" with her. "I wrote it after my kids were in bed from 9pm-Midnight," explains Cantillo (whose book author credit is Laurie Parsons). "I did that for a year."

Simon & Schuster acquired book rights in 1997; it was re-released two years ago and has been sold in the United States and six foreign countries. "I've always wanted to be a writer and did some freelance work for The Denver Post," Cantillo notes. "In an undercover piece I assessed area daycare chains. I love investigative reporting and family/parenting issues. I feel I still have a few more books in me [although] I'm not sure if they will be about radio."

Having grown up in Colorado, it seems Cantillo is most at home in the outdoors and enjoys escaping to her cabin in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. "Pictured Rocks is one of the most beautiful places on earth," she strongly contends. "The water is as clean as anywhere you'll see in the world. If it has anything to do with hiking, sightseeing or photography – I'm there."

Dream-world situation would be for this affable programmer to live winters in southern Arizona/summers in the Upper Peninsula and write the next ten best-selling novels. "This is going to be my last job," Cantillo insists. "I'd love to continue to build on the great heritage of this radio station and take it to the next level. It doesn't get any better than WABC in New York. I want to be a good steward of this station; be proud of decisions made here; and have a good long haul. When I'm done, I'll ride off into the sunset."



WHO: Laurie Cantillo

WHAT: Program Director

WHERE: Citadel Talk WABC-AM/New York City

WHEN: Since February 2, 2009

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