

THE NEW GOSPEL

WHLD-AM 1270 brings progressive politics to the region's airwaves

At midnight on Monday, February 13, WHLD-AM 1270 gave up its gospel programming in favor of a new message: The station's managers, a partnership of journalists, activists and academics called Niagara Independent Media, call it "The Voice of Reason." It is, in any case, Buffalo's only true progressive news and talk radio station.

"Right wing and corporate politics not only dominate the airwaves, they have sucked the life out of them," says Michael I. Niman, a partner in Niagara Independent Media and contributor to this newspaper. "Radio was once vibrant and unpredictable, it was pleasantly chaotic. We're bringing radio back to what it was in its heyday."

In today's heavily corporatized media environment, where the politics run from middle-of-the-road to the darkest right, AM 1270 is a startling exception. Its programming includes Air America, the syndicated, mainstream liberal network that features former *Saturday Night Live* writer Al Franken and Randi Rhodes. And it is the region's first radio station to broadcast *Democracy Now!*, the hugely popular, nationally syndicated news and talk show hosted by Amy Goodman and Juan Rodriguez, weekday mornings, 9-10am. But AM 1270 also features local voices such as Grady Hawkins and Joe Schmidbauer, formerly of the progressive weekly *alt*, 10am-noon on weekdays, as well as local broadcast veteran Ray Marks, partnering with labor activist Alex Blair during the weekday morning drive-time show, 6-9am. The weekends, currently populated with a mix of syndicated and local programming, are envisioned as an outlet for true community-based programming, where seldom-heard constituencies can find a voice.

"Conservative talk radio does not reflect the positions of even the most conservative politicians in this region," says Brian Brown-Cashdollar, president of Niagara Independent Media and general manager of AM 1270. "They are not reflecting the conservative agenda—they're trying to shape it. I think we're offering a format that reflects the positions of the majority of Western New Yorkers."

The station was born out of a long and—until two weeks ago—fruitless campaign among progressive media activists to find someone who would broadcast *Democracy Now!*. The program airs on 350 stations across the country, but until AM 1270 came under its new management, the closest it had come to Buffalo was 109 miles away on WEOS-FM in Geneva, New York.

Brown-Cashdollar was among those who took part in the campaign. "I once stupidly went to a Green Party meeting and announced, 'I'm buying a radio station.' To which Professor Niman said, 'Do you know how much they cost?'"

Too much, it turned out. But Brown-Cashdollar and others started raising money anyway. Amy Goodman came to town for a fundraiser at Hallwalls. The event raked in \$9,000—not bad for one night whose main draw was not a rock star or a film actor or even a politician, but rather a news radio anchor from California. The activists had previously felt the need for a progressive radio outlet in Buffalo; now they figured there



Grady Hawkins of WHLD-AM 1270

might even be a market for one. They leased time on WHLD-AM 1270, owned by Citadel Communications Co., and begged for contributions in between local news and talk programs. Money started coming in.

Niman, meanwhile, had been pursuing existing radio stations, particularly WBEN and WBFO, to convince them that *Democracy Now!* was good business.

"I myself during one WNED pledge drive collected \$5,000 in contingency pledges, which were people who pledged to me that they would give money to WNED if it would play *Democracy Now!*. And I called up the manager of WNED and said, 'Look, you're losing money by not playing this program. Clearly your right-wing, corporate ideology is costing you money and listeners, which is why you are teetering on the edge of bankruptcy and irrelevance.'"

The pitch didn't work. "In response he was kind of curt and nasty," Niman says.

Finally Niagara Independent Media, having raised some money and borrowed the rest, entered an agreement with Citadel to manage the programming on 1270-AM, with an option to buy the station down the road. It is a commercial enterprise, not pledge-driven.

"It's a community service and we believe we can make money doing that," Niman says. "We want to show that a progressive format is commercially viable. As long as you have every other radio station spouting the same corporate product, you have made a market niche for the alternative."

Entercom, the corporate parent of WKBW and WBEN, seems to agree. A few days after AM 1270's new management announced its plans, Entercom flipped WKBW to a liberal news and talk format.

"WKBW is Alan Colmes to WBEN's Sean Hannity," Brown-Cashdollar says. "It's designed to fool people into thinking that this is what left-wing radio sounds like. We're the real thing."

A complete program schedule can be found at www.whld1270am.com.

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