



MAKING TRACKS

Longtime radio station KEPC mover, shaker signs off

The Gazette (Colorado Springs, CO)

February 1, 2004 | ROBIN A. ROTHMAN THE GAZETTE

Kurt Grow is a pleasant, sort of Martin Mull-ish figure with wire-rimmed glasses and the same mustache he wore in the early '80s. Not quite the kind of hipster you'd stop on the street for music advice.

But the 56-year-old man's appearance belies his leverage. Grow, it turns out, is what folks in the entertainment industry call a "tastemaker." He's one of the edgiest individuals in Colorado Springs radio. And he has been for three decades.

He ditched DJ-dom long ago, but his influence still is felt at stations in the Springs and beyond. It's a quiet legacy that has come to an end.

Grow, a professor at Pikes Peak Community College, retired from teaching in August. On Dec. 12, he retired again -- this time from his role as program director and station manager of the school's radio station, KEPC (89.7 FM).

Since 1973, Grow had been building KEPC piece by technological and musical piece, creating and constantly updating a state-of-the-art radio station and providing the most eclectic source of music on Springs-area airwaves.

In doing so, he also established a successful training ground for aspiring radio personnel. He taught courses in writing, production, on-air skills and Federal Communications Commission rules and regulations as his full-time job -- and kept the station up to speed in his spare time.

From vinyl records to his new favorite toy, a USB flash drive ("This thing holds 256 megabytes!"), Grow made sure KEPC graduates would be prepared for the real world of high-tech, competitive radio.

The "longest-running continuous program director in this town" says his love of the medium kicked in when he was 11, growing up in upstate New York. In those days, signals as far away as Boston and Chicago came in loud and clear on his portable transistor radio. He was hooked.

When he attended college at the State University of New York at Geneseo, he studied radio. At one point, he held part-time jobs at five stations simultaneously.

Then, in 1968, he scored his first fulltime gig.

As he tells it, he was working part-time at a country station in Rochester, N.Y. One day, the morning show host/program director put his head down to rest while someone else read the news.

"When the news guy gave it back to him, he didn't get up," Grow says. "He was dead. Right on the air, he had a heart attack.

"And that's how I got my first job."

After stints in Denver (1971) and St. Louis (1972), he landed in Colorado Springs as a DJ at Top 40 station KYSN late in 1972.

To stay fresh, he took classes in electronics technology at El Paso Community College (now PPCC) in 1973. Later that year, he accepted a part-time teaching position in the school's broadcasting department and by September he was teaching full-time.

Immediately, Grow was charged with preparing KEPC for transmission.

GROW'S JOBS GROW

When he began, KEPC could be heard in the college cafeteria. Today, the station broadcasts 24 hours a day at just under 8,000 watts, with translators in Manitou Springs and Pueblo.

KEPC operates at one-tenth the power of other local stations such as KILO (94.3 FM), where Grow worked part-time from 1981 to 1993. What he learned hands-on, he incorporated into his teaching.

In 1990, his colleague and friend Jack Donahue, the man who had hired him, retired. Grow took over his course load and his role as department chair of the Telecommunications program. Suddenly he didn't have seven days a week to dedicate to the station. And it's not like he was getting paid.

It wasn't until 1997 that the college compensated Grow for his dedication to KEPC, paying him for three teaching hours per semester. Not that he's complaining.

He loved music and he loved to instill that love in others. "The time I spent talking with my dad was usually spent talking about music," says Grow's 23-year-old son Kory, a musician and assistant editor at the music industry magazine CMJ.

"I spent hours sifting through his records."

When the elder Grow's basement flooded in 1994, Kory and his dad organized a massive collection of more than 1,400 LPs into alphabetical order. "It was a healthy dose of music history," he says.

That natural passion for music was what drove students at the station, too. "I wouldn't have been doing it if I didn't like it," the elder Grow says. And most importantly, the station was vital to his students' educations.

"I've always thought of myself as a professional two ways: a professional broadcaster and a professional educator," Grow says. "When somebody would come back and say they got a job, that was always the best thing."

By his count, at least a thousand PPCC students have gone on to careers in radio under his watch, landing jobs as engineers, programmers, disc jockeys or broadcasting traffic, weather or the news.

"I never really felt much like a student. He was always more of a friend. A true mentor," says Mark Murray, who studied under Grow in the late '70s when PPCC was still El Paso Community College.

Murray went on to become a program director for KSPZ (92.9 FM) and a weatherman for television stations KOAA and KKTV. He is now chief meteorologist at television station KVUE in Austin, Texas, where he has been based for 13 years.

"But thanks to Kurt, I still carry that passion for radio," he says. "After a late night on TV, I get up extra early each morning just to be part of the morning team at KGSR-FM."

Grow was already "firmly entrenched" when Clear Channel General Manager Bob Gourley arrived on the scene 17 years ago. "Without him, a lot of good radio people wouldn't have gone into radio," Gourley says, citing KBIQ (102.7 FM) program director "Uncle" Steve Etheridge as an example.

TECHNOLOGY GAP

Also among Grow's graduates-turned-local personalities are Metro Traffic director of operations Janine McGuire, Eagle (103.9 FM) jock Gary Street, and KILO program director Ross Ford, who recently visited his old professor.

"Still smells like the old KEPC, man" Ford noted upon entering the station. Hands in his pockets, he took a sweeping look around at the sticker-covered walls. He hadn't been back to KEPC for years.

Offering Ford an updated nickel tour, Grow flipped on the light switch in a cramped, windowless corner room.

The closet-sized hovel is one of the college's radio teaching labs, full of gadgetry and nostalgia.

This lab, unlike the other eight surrounding it, is almost an anachronistic shrine to radio technology, where a cart machine, rotary console, reel-to-reel and turntable -- the kind of stuff you see on "WKRP" reruns, but not in most radio stations these days -- is paired with the DJ's new best friend, a computer.

The equipment pre-dates Ford's two years of study at PPCC, from 1992-94, when his intent was to become a cameraman for the television show "Cops" -- before Grow got hold of him.

Back then the station's music was culled primarily from the more than 2,000 CDs that lined the studio walls. The DJ had to find a CD, load it and cue a track. It was an improvement over the cumbersome process '70s DJs endured -- looking up a catalog number, finding the album, removing the sleeve from the jacket and the record from the sleeve, putting the needle on the record then holding it until it was time to spin.

THOROUGHLY MODERN

Modern DJs have it easier. They search computer files for songs and promos, create digital play schedules, then sit back and let technology take over.

Now that he's a program director himself, Ford's appreciation of Grow's demeanor is even more pronounced. "I've never seen Kurt lose his cool. Ever. With that many green people? Most people are bi-polar," Ford says. "One time I got locked out of the studio. My CD went dead. He didn't even get mad about that. Most people would hand you your ass."

Grow laughed, recalling the event. He clicked the computer mouse, proudly demonstrating the latest software students learn.

If for some reason there's dead air, Grow explained, a secondary system that runs at the same time will kick in after 13 seconds. Ford could have used that.

Compared with the hundreds of songs a commercial station might keep around, KEPC's computer holds more than 5,200, all available at the click of a mouse. Grow calls the computer "a great big jukebox." It's a database worthy of the station's format label, "Maximum Variety."

"Eat for Two" by 10,000 Maniacs was the first file recorded, Grow remembers. The last was "Assassinate the Sun," a song from the new Flaming Lips EP "Ego Tripping at the Gates of Hell."

Grow never outgrew his passion for new music. For him, this year's releases have as much to offer as the stuff that came out of his old transistor radio.

In a time when even the average kid doesn't know who Ween is, Grow lists the quirky duo's new album "Quebec" as one of his favorites from 2003. He pours over weekly music charts, reads industry magazines, gives promos a fair spin and keeps his mind open. When he finds something he likes, he adds it to the collection.

Grow singlehandedly transferred almost 5,000 songs on the KEPC computer from CDs, cassette tapes and vinyl records, starting the five-year project during a sabbatical.

On another sabbatical in 1987, Grow spent eight months planning the programming and overseeing the inception of KKQX, now KCLI (106.3 FM).

Grow spent another break writing an operations manual for the station, Ford says. Little does he know that Grow has spent the past couple months composing similar manuals "on every possible thing the station does" as reference for when he's not around.

Grow admits he's weaning himself off rather than quitting cold turkey. His retirement may be a done deal, but with his emeritus status, he maintains some access. A picture of his wife and son still grace the desktop of the station's office computer. He hopes to be active in choosing his replacement and has lobbied the school administration to make the job a full-time paid position.

And he's always a phone call away.

But he emphasizes that he's made the right decision by retiring. It was time.

"There are a lot of things I want to do yet, but I still don't have time," he says. "Like organizing my music collection. I've got 15,000 songs in MP3 form."

He plans to get in some Arizona golf trips and to rediscover his love of ham radio. His wife has gotten him into yoga classes.

"All these things you kind of put away and think 'Well, I'll get to it eventually,'" he says. "And now eventually is here."