

WRYR Carves Niche on Airwaves

Grass-roots station moves up in 'ultra-local' market; 'Definitely starting to catch on'

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The studio is above the Domino's Pizza in the southern Anne Arundel hamlet of Churchton. The broadcast tower is at a marina in Sherwood, across the Chesapeake Bay in Talbot County.

But in just under a year, the 100-watt, low-power community radio station WRYR 97.5 FM LP has carved a niche in a brand-new market: "ultra-local" radio.

"It is definitely starting to catch on," said founder Mike Shay, who saw the station as a way for the grass-roots environmental group South Arundel Citizens for Responsible Development (SACReD) to make its voice heard within the Deale-Churchton community. "We saw a need to have a place to discuss the issues affecting our community at length."

WRYR went on the air last February, serving coastal areas around the county and parts of the Eastern Shore. It is one of 100 rural community radio stations that was licensed by the Federal Communications Commission last year.

In addition to a full complement of environmental programming sponsored by the local environmental group, WRYR brings to the airwaves an audio smorgasbord by volunteer disc jockeys.

"If you look at the larger radio market, it's like a mall, you kind of know what to expect; we are like the country store," said Eric Funk, program director of WRYR, who came onboard shortly after the station got started.

An electrical engineer, Funk, like many others who have gotten involved with the station, is a college radio alumnus. As program director, he is in charge of filling the 24 hours that the station is on the air each day.

Using a Macintosh computer that he donated and thousands of music files contributed by the staff, he created an automated playlist that is a mix of jazz, rock, bluegrass and everything in between. This program plays when there are no shows.

As the station has gained attention, Funk also has been charged with training DJs to run a radio show in compliance with FCC regulations governing low-power FM radio.

Many of the DJs had never been to a radio station before, let alone been a DJ. Most, like Jackie Savitz, have been intrigued by radio for some time.

"You know, I always wanted to be a DJ," said Savitz, an environmental advocacy specialist during the week who serves as the host of Sunday Potluck at 7 p.m. each week.

She arrives at the studio with a wicker basket filled with compact discs from her collection of adult alternative music and a general idea of what she wants to play. "I usually have a theme." On a recent Sunday, she said, "I was thinking a lot about Martin Luther King, so that sort of informed the show."

Jeff Crespi, another volunteer DJ, is a bassist who played professionally for 15 years and now offers jazz Sunday afternoons.

"I play the music that influenced me to become a musician," he said. "You hear things on this station you will not hear anywhere else, guaranteed."

The station's lineup reflects the varied interests of the volunteer DJs.

"Mystress Terri" is host of an advice show about relationships that airs Friday nights. Carolyn Stearns is host of Family Story Hour.

In addition to rock and alternative music programs, there is a zydeco show, a blues program and Tim Finch's bluegrass show Saturday afternoons. Finch, who fronts the local band Good Deale Bluegrass, spins the American music discs that his fans know and love.

The Rev. Adrienne Terry, pastor of Franklin United Methodist Church in Churchton, brings Gospel Train to Deale on Sunday mornings. The Good Red Road is a Native American program, with hosts Jay Winter Nightwolf and Rico Newman.

The hours are filling up, and the SACReD committee that runs the station is considering new shows. Shay and Funk are pleased with the diversity of the programs evolving with the station.

"I am just so proud that our community has chosen to participate in this project," Shay said.

The concept of broadcasting the many voices of communities reached by the 100-watt "power of a light bulb" station has paid off for SACReD, as well.

Shay points out that the station has brought the communities on both sides of the Chesapeake Bay together to discuss environmental and development issues.

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