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## Spinning success

Tara Milligan

WEVL, the radio station Memphians began listening to in 1976, will never be as big as a corporate-owned station.

But WEVL, which today reaches listeners within 50 miles of Memphis, has a kind of musical street cred that creates loyalty commercial radio stations can only dream of.

WEVL's volunteer programmers currently create more than 60 different programs throughout the week. The station's eclectic programs feature blues, jazz, Memphis music, world music, bluegrass and country along with other musical genres.

Judy Dorsey, station manager, recently saw an example of the loyalty WEVL admirers harbor. While surfing the Web, Dorsey looked for any mentions of the station that she could link to from WEVL's Web site. She found an article about a community radio station in Toronto that quoted a professor of ethnomusicology in Canada, Rob Bowman.

Bowman, it turns out, was an early programmer at WEVL, and he gave WEVL credit for launching a lifelong musical exploration that culminated in his 1996 Grammy Award for Best Album Notes for "The Complete Stax/Volt Soul Singles, Vol. 3: 1972-1975."

"I heard this station, and it was mind blowing -- I hadn't heard radio like this before," Bowman was quoted as saying.

However, Bowman went on to say that his start as a radio programmer was cut short when WEVL had financial problems in the mid-1980s and had to temporarily shut down. The experience showed him that community radio stations can never take fundraising for granted.

Dorsey and WEVL program director, Brian Craig, couldn't agree more.

WEVL is the city's only nonprofit radio station that does not rely on an affiliation with an educational or religious institution, a public radio and/or television network, or any kind of government funding.

About 80% of the station's funds come from listener contributions. The rest is generated through fundraisers such as the annual Blues on the Bluff music festivals at the National Ornamental Metal Museum.

In 2003, the station reported expenses of \$185,593. WEVL has only three paid positions, Dorsey, Craig and an office assistant. And yet the station manages to broadcast for 16 hours on weeknights and up to 18 hours on weekends from its humble home on South Main. And only a handful of the shows, which run from one to four hours, are taped. Most programmers broadcast their shows live.

Craig says the programmers come from all walks of life.

"And the people are such experts about their genre," Craig says. "And they're very passionate about it."

The station hosts two annual fundraisers, in the spring and in the fall, to raise money. The fall fundraiser, which was kicked off on Nov. 5, wraps up on Saturday, and Craig says the station needs to raise about \$60,000 during the week.

"We're good with the money," Dorsey says. "We're tightwads."

Dorsey, who first became involved in the station in 1978, says despite the station's 28 years on the air, fundraising is never easy.

"When the economy eases up, it's a little easier, but when the economy is tight, it's more of a challenge," she says.

Dorsey is also the programmer of "Old-Time Country Music Hour," which airs from 3-4 p.m. on Wednesdays.

Dorsey says although there's no money in the station's budget for advertising, strong word of mouth and serendipity lead listeners to the station.

"A lot of people, when they first move here, are looking for something like us because they've heard other stations like this in other cities," Dorsey says. "Newcomers are more open to experimenting. We do get a lot of people when they first move here."

Dorsey says some listeners have said they found the station because it was programmed into a car they rented, or that their radio was tuned into WEVL after they got it back from getting repairs. Dorsey says she's walked into stores to find all the radios on sale tuned to WEVL.

"I think we have little guerillas out there in Memphis," Dorsey says.

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