

YOU'RE ON THE AIR!



by Diana J. Mason

The evolution of a one-of-a-kind radio show produced by nurses...

As I walked to the radio station to do my first show, almost twenty years ago, I will never forget how my pulse raced and my breathing became quick and shallow. I was having an anxiety attack!

Although I had prepared as much as I could to moderate a live radio program, the thought of thousands of people listening in just about put me over the edge. Nursing, however, had taught me that anxiety can sometimes help us get through challenges, whatever they may be. I took some deep breaths, and began my first show. By the time the program was over, I was relaxed, and yet exhilarated, having completed my first segment of “Every Woman Space,” later named “Healthstyles,” the only radio program produced by nurses in New York City at that time. I have been producing and moderating this award-winning, live weekly radio program, along with my colleague Barbara Glickstein, RN, MPH, since 1986.



The author (foreground) moderating her live radio program “Healthstyles.”

a community radio station in New York City, asking if the Association could recommend a nurse to speak about women’s health. Diane Mancino, (who is now the NSNA Executive Director), was a member of the Association’s Public Relations Committee and volunteered to be interviewed. She did such a good job that the station asked her to produce a monthly women’s health program. She and a colleague, Paula Tedesco, produced and moderated “EVERYWOMAN-SPACE” for almost seven years, and they received a media award from Sigma Theta Tau International Nursing Honor Society for their work.

By 1986, Diane and Paula wanted to take on other projects, so they invited Barbara and me to join their team and transition taking over the show. Over time, we changed the name of the program and its focus, from women’s health to general health and health policy issues, and we obtained a weekly time slot on Friday afternoons.

Initially, it took me about eight hours to prepare for a program, including background preparation in interviewing experts on a wide variety of topics. Gradually, I realized I had a solid foundation in most of the subject areas, but that the key was asking the right questions. Over the years, I have grown increasingly confident about my skills to produce a great radio program. Now, it takes me less time to prepare for a program because I know what points to focus on and how to conduct an interview—as a “conversation” with an expert.

The Beginning

In 1979, the New York Counties Registered Nurses Association (District 13 of the New York State Nurses Association) received a call from WBAI (99.5FM),

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Discussion Topics

“Healthstyles” has focused on alternative and complementary approaches to health care, the nursing shortage, the Medicare prescription drug law, and a variety of health-related topics. As nurses, we bring to our listeners timely information and unique perspectives on cutting edge topics you won’t find anywhere else. For example, we were the first media outlet to discuss the resurgence of tuberculosis in New York City in the 1980s, after hearing that public health nurses were seeing a rise in this infectious disease, particularly among immigrant and immunocompromised populations.

Most of our programs are live, call-in shows, although we have produced some pretaped and documentary segments, which are more difficult. One of our favorite documentaries was entitled, “What you need to know when you go to an ER,” complete with ambulance sirens and ER “noise” in the background, and solid advice on when to go to the ER, what triage is, and how to get the attention you need. On a humorous note, we reminded listeners that, contrary to what their mothers had told them about wearing clean underwear in case of an emergency, the ER staff will not care!

We also produce several public service messages. On one special

program, a guest nurse and I walked listeners through completing an advance directive. (The station had published a standard advance directive form in its monthly newsletter for people to complete as they listened to the program.) On another occasion, I partnered with the Community Service Society (CSS) a nonprofit organization committed to fighting poverty and strengthening community life in New York City, to air a three-hour special on how to select and use a managed care plan. We opened up the lines for call-ins, and the program was a great success, with an increased number of requests for information on managed care. We then published an article about this project in the *American Journal of Public Health* as a model for other radio stations and communities to replicate.¹

Sometimes, we devote the entire hour to one topic; other programs will cover two or three topics in a magazine format. While planning programs in advance, we also provide a venue for other groups to share information on timely issues. For example, we have often featured brief interviews of nurses on strike, with suggestions for follow-up action on how listeners can support them. Also, we do not shy away from controversial or sensitive topics. For example, a nurse expert in sexual health led a frank, thoughtful

discussion with listeners. Another nurse expert on incontinence helped break the silence about this condition. These two topics proved enormously popular.

One of our most exciting radio projects was “Youth Pulse,” a special radio program produced through grants from The Benton and Robert Wood Johnson Foundations. We partnered with Global Kids, a youth advocacy organization in New York City, and trained teens on how to produce radio programming to prevent teen substance abuse. Listeners frequently called in to acknowledge the teens’ good work and the importance of hearing perspectives from today’s youth. As an outgrowth of this project, WBAI continues to support youth programming.

How Are We Doing?

Barbara and I often review each other’s taped programs and request feedback from staff at the station. It was suggested that we try a magazine format and theme music, both of which have enhanced the program. The station clearly values our work by continuing our program over all these years, despite increasing competition for air time. Our work has also received a number of awards, including media awards for overall excellence from the American Academy of Nursing and the Public Health Association of New York City; and the Media Achievement Award from the National Association of Childbearing Centers for a program on drive-through deliveries. In 2003, I received the first Media Award of the New York State Nurses Association for my work with “Healthstyles” and the American Journal of Nursing. But perhaps the greatest reward are phone calls from appreciative listeners, expressing their gratitude for our show.

Media Opportunities for Nursing Students

Nursing students are ideal candidates for being involved in health programming on university radio stations. I hope many of you will

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TIPS FOR LAUNCHING A RADIO OR TELEVISION PROJECT

1. Pitch your idea. Cable television and community radio stations often welcome good programming ideas. Research the media outlets in your community, and propose in writing a program idea to the appropriate television or radio station, preferably to the director of programming. Develop an abstract and outline of a sample program and a list of other topics. Follow up on your proposal by calling the programming director and scheduling an appointment to meet in person. During your meeting, propose that the station “pilot” (try out) one of your programs.

2. Assess your audience. Who listens to the station and what health care issues are most likely to interest them? You might want to conduct informal interviews or surveys to research this further. Or, perhaps you have ideas from discussions with your faculty and peers.

3. Promote your program. Once a station has agreed to run your program, you should congratulate yourself—you have made an enormous first step. Now, you should publicize your program. Radio stations can help you produce a promotional tape to alert listeners about the topic and when it will air. For a campus radio station,

post fliers with information on bulletin boards, and for a call-in show, make sure you have a few people to initiate the calls and get the action rolling.

4. Plan your format. If your show is going to be an interview format, you will need to decide your guest lineup, research their background, and develop a list of questions, keeping in mind you will need to be spontaneous and “go with the flow” of the interview. Make sure you have plenty of “extra” interview questions handy. Panic can easily set in when you realize that you’re about to finish all of your questions and there are still 20 minutes left on air! Also, keep in mind that more than likely you will be the moderator, and not the expert, for most topics; therefore, it is your job to keep the discussion balanced and focused.



5. Evaluate your work. Listen to a recording of your show and determine its strengths and weaknesses. Ask someone with expertise in radio production to provide you with feedback, and don’t be afraid to try new things. You might even collaborate with the university’s communications or journalism department to produce and evaluate a show.

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consider volunteering to produce a health program relevant to your peers or working within your nursing schools to produce a community radio program. NSNA has an annual Image Project award, for which media coverage is one of the criteria, and the prize is a plaque presented at the annual convention each year. Consider National Student Nurses Day, May 8 each year, as an opportunity to organize a media project, such as conducting radio or video interviews about the public's perception of nursing, and getting them on the air. Many student projects have had great success getting local publicity. (See resources.)

Why not approach your community health nursing or health promotion instructor with developing a radio project as part of your clinical? Or your NSNA chapter could collaborate with the campus radio station to produce an ongoing monthly or weekly half-hour on health. Once you've graduated, approach your local nurses association with doing the same. The airwaves need more nurses! ■

REFERENCES

1. Mason, D. J., Nichols, T. E., Molnar, C. & Bernstein, A. Using public media to teach medicaid recipients about managed care. *American Journal of Public Health*, 90(1), 34-35, 2000.



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resources

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WBAI radio station
<http://www.wbai.org/>
 Click on Programming on the home page, for Fridays at 1:00 pm.

NSNA Guidelines for Planning Image of Nursing Projects
http://www.nсна.org/pubs/guidelines/image_guidelines.pdf

Pew Center for Civic Journalism
<http://www.pewcenter.org>