

Living on Airwaves: **WYRS** FM 90.7

By: Victoria Ford

“

I have a ‘Plan B’ for everything,” says the lifelong radio-AV tech-newsman Bob Wick, founder and producer of Manahawkin’s WYRS 90.7 FM – “community radio with a Christian perspective.” Being prepared for anything and good under pressure are two skills that have served him well; with airwaves, every second counts.

He’s been on the air since March 27, 1995, at that time transmitting from the WJRZ tower in Manahawkin. But the station’s home base has always been in Manahawkin, where he and his wife Nancy have lived for decades.

Wick grew up in cow country out in Downingtown/ Exton, Pa., but “my heart’s always been down here,” he said.

He got his ham radio license when he was 14. “It’s been 50 years, but I have never gotten beyond the amazement of, I can throw a switch and be around the world.”

He graduated from high school in 1971, did a stint at Drexel University (a.k.a. “the worst year of my life – I’m a tech-o, not an engineer,” he said), relocated to Southern Ocean County, worked as a TV repairman on Long Beach Island for many years, then started with New Jersey Network in 1985, where he stayed for 26½ years.

“I called myself ‘the generic employee,’ ” he said. “I climbed towers, I took out trash, they put me in news, I was a shooter, editor, live truck operator. It’s been seven years since they shut us down, and it still hurts.”

During his news years, he often pulled 11-hour days. “I would drive to Trenton, get the truck, maybe go to Cape May, maybe Port Jervis. A lot of driving. I got to see a lot of stuff, cool stories. I was up at the Taj Mahal for one story, in their \$10,000-a-night suite, and I’ve been up to my knees in pig doo-doo in Salem. Was at the Salem power plant when the NRC was there saying ‘shape up or shut down.’ ”

Now he’s retired but “working harder than ever.”

Bob and Nancy met at Manahawkin Baptist Church. Nancy had grown up near Atlantic City and became a science teacher at Southern Regional and later at Lighthouse Christian Academy in Manahawkin. She was a tomboy who changed her own motor oil, Bob said fondly.



Bob Wick.

Photo credit: Victoria Ford

“He’s a geek, and I’m only half-geek,” Nancy said.

(Bob clarified, to amusing effect: “A geek is a person with good technical savvy and good interpersonal skills. What’s not to love? A nerd has tech savvy and lacks social skills. A dork has neither. Everything the Lord did not create, that you see, was designed by a geek who wasn’t happy with the world the way it is. Have you hugged a geek today?”)

They started WYRS because they had long identified a need in the area.

“Without apology, we’re a Christian radio station,” he said. “We’ve been on 23 years, and our philosophy is ‘Christian, family and community.’ It’s all-volunteer, we don’t charge for programming, and we just kind of mulishly plod along. We’ve decided what we can do consistently day to day, because, you can’t have a hot day and a ho-hum day. ‘We are what we are,’ folks. We have notebooks and notebooks and notebooks of letters over the years, from kids to seniors.”

While they’re always looking for help, he added, “we’re selective” – make that, “extremely conservatively cautious” – about who they let in to their station. Mostly they look for referrals from churches. The ideal candidate is a retiree, someone who has the hours to give to keep things running. “The last thing you get is an open mike,” Bob said.

In a car, WYRS comes in clearly from pretty much Ocean City to north of Toms River, he said. FM 91.7 comes in up to Garden State Parkway milepost 105, and west to Four-Mile Circle. Any station below 92 on the FM band, he explained, is required to be non-commercial and educational, a legal, nonprofit entity.

“We run the whole mess on \$11.50 an hour,” he said. “Everything. It’s really ‘non-profit.’” Parked in their backyard in Manahawkin is a small fleet of remote trucks they use to broadcast from community events. The big satellite dish, which he installed about 18 years ago, receives a lot of national programs and news from Washington D.C. and beyond.

Bob Wick pointed at the sky. “Up in the atmosphere, in the geostationary orbit 22,000 miles out, is a satellite every two degrees. We happen to be on AMC-3...” (SES World Skies’ commercial broadcast communications satellite).

He gets very excited talking about radio and showing how it all works.

Due to the curvature of the planet, a straight line drawn from a point 300 feet aboveground hits the horizon at 27 miles, he explained. “If you’re 1,000 feet in the air, you hit the horizon at 50 miles. Doesn’t matter the power of the signal, FM is line of sight. With ham radio, ionosphere comes into play. Different layers have different characteristics based on sun’s position.” He continued, in summer conditions, at sunrise or sunset, or if it’s foggy and hot, FM radio will sound like a mess. “That’s called tropospheric ducting. Hot air below cold air, creates ducts and traps the frequencies.”

His passion for radio is rooted in a firm belief in point-to-point emergency communications. “When the Internet goes down, doesn’t matter, we’re still on the air.” Every town has an amateur radio station, HF and VHF, he explained. During Superstorm Sandy, “they could have transmitted to me, and I could have taken them to air, but nobody did anything, because everybody’s locked into the Internet – forgetting about the people up at Southern (the emergency shelter), who have nothing but a radio. Very frustrating.”

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Photo credit: Victoria Ford
WYRS basement studio.

Inside the inner sanctum, Wick gave a tour of the rows upon rows of electronic equipment on shelves, neatly organized: This box sends the signal from here to the transmitter at JRZ. This one sends the signal from here to West Creek. This one is receiving from the tower in West Creek. Here is the emergency alert system. This is processing; this puts us on the internet; this is the receiver we use for remotes. Programs from the satellite dish come in to multiple receivers.

He gestured toward a 19-year-old computer, “the main brains of the station.”

“This computer is what’s running the station right now,” he said. “It’s like the conductor. What to put on air, when. And it’s all (timed) to the second. In 14 minutes, at the bottom of the hour, we’ll go to news.” Nancy gets up every day at 5:15 a.m., checks the overnight reports, tracks the weather, programs the menu.

“I couldn’t do it without her,” Bob said.

From the beginning, it’s been a labor of love. As technology has changed, radio has required more computer work, which is why Nancy left teaching in 1999 to stay home and help run things. At that time, Bob was living on four hours of sleep a night.

“The computer takes it from the satellite dish, takes it to air, and then switches back to playing music or programming from this computer over here,” Nancy explained. “I do it at night for the next day; all the PSAs are updated.” The regular daily programs automatically repeats every week. If for any reason there’s dead air for three minutes, an alarm sounds. If the transmitter has issues, it alerts Bob by phone.

Bob compared running a radio station to keeping plates spinning on sticks – that old Ed Sullivan routine.

But at least with the computers, “we can have a life away from the station,” he said. “Used to be, you had to be here for every break.”

The station airs a mix of music and teaching programs, a kids’ block, sermons from local churches, a Spanish-language show, and tons of public service announcements for nonprofits. Saturdays are community-focused, Sundays are traditional; overnight is old hymns. “We’ll put you to sleep, that’s the idea,” Bob said. His program is music and comment on various informational, intellectual topics. (He considers himself blessed to wear two hats as both a technician and journalist.)

His two requirements for any Christian programming: “It has to be biblically defendable, and you’ve got to speak the truth in love.”

“We’re not here primarily to entertain,” he said. “We are here to educate and edify, arms open, no daggers in our hands.” He quoted the book Corinthians: “God has chosen through the foolishness of the word ‘preach’ to win those who believe.”

That's not going to bring ratings, but I don't want an hour to go by without reminding listeners why we're here."

The Wicks are driven by the desire to serve the community. "We do this because we want to serve the area, and serve the Lord," he said. Years ago, their 13-year-old neighbor Brian Lutz started volunteering at the station and got bitten by the bug hard. Not only did he learn how to run YRS, Bob said, but he went on to attend Montclair University and is now an editor/ producer for CNN.

"Radio is an amazing thing," Bob Wick said. "And from a Christian perspective, the most effective [way to mission] is always one on one. ... But you can punch us up, and you don't have to admit it, and you can turn us off."

Wick still gets choked up when he recalls the first full-power test he ran, on Dec. 17, 1994, from an antenna on the WJRZ tower. "It was midnight, and I said, 'I think I can get this thing on the air tonight.'" So he went and visually inspected the tower and determined it was stable enough, so he said, "let's put some audio up." In the middle of the night, he put a CD on at the station, and took a drive north and south, the full range. When he got home, he woke Nancy up. "I turned on the radio in the bedroom and said, 'Hey, take a listen to this.' She said, 'what's that?' I said, 'It's us.'" They've been running continuously since the following March (with the exception of a mere two hours during Superstorm Sandy when the chimney blew off and took out some equipment).

The station's main transmitter, in West Creek, formerly was a marine coastal station that handled traffic for ships in Morse Code from 1914 to 1978. "It is indeed a historic site, and it's really cool that we've got it," he said. "I grew up in Brant Beach, looking across the bay at that tower, but never in my wildest dreams did I ever think we'd have stewardship of the site."

The West Creek tower came up for sale in 2003 for \$125,000, which the Wicks bought using a three-year, interest-only loan from Julius Robinson. YRS has never done on-air fundraising, or what Bob calls a "beg-a-thon," but when the opportunity arose to buy that 300-ft tower (plus an 1,800-sq-foot block building and four 60-foot towers) on 23 acres of mud, he appealed to the listeners: "All I'm asking is for x number of people to give us a dollar a day for a year, and we can pull it off. And that's all we did. And it was paid off in 19 months." No shtick, no names on bricks.

Today, the majority of the station's support is from individuals. Private and anonymous, consistent and faithful. As Bob likes to say, "a rainstorm is comprised of many small individual rain drops." You won't find a "how to donate" button on the homepage, and he refuses to offer automatic draft. He wants every contributor to decide at the beginning of the month if the station was worthy of their support that month.

As he tells his listeners, the best advertisement is word of mouth. "Everything that's on is on for a reason; it's on for content, and not because of support or lack thereof."

Especially in light of the industry-wide trend of radio stations changing ownership and format often (90 percent of all radio stations are run by five companies, he noted), Bob said: "We're here for the long haul, and we consider it a privilege."

