

Radio's 'Beat of Wilmington' has unique sound

By Andrea Miller
Staff Reporter

Leaning into a microphone in the small radio sound room, Ross Johnston slips headphones over his ears, glances up at the playlist on the wall-mounted flat screen for a time check, and eases rush hour commuters into the music break at the top of the hour.

"That was Georgie Porgie with 'I Love I Love' on Delaware's feel good station, 91.7 FM WMPH," Johnston says in a smooth DJ voice announcing the commercial-free station that reaches 500,000 potential listeners in the tri-state area. "Georgie Porgie will be performing at the 2006 WMPH DanceFest at Baxter's. For more information, give us a call."

Johnston makes eye contact with Nick Catka in the adjacent director's chair, a cue for Catka to roll in a public service announcement with the flip of a switch on the audio mixing console in Studio A.

The DJ pushes back in his chair, exhales, shakes a lock of wavy brown hair from his eyes, then returns to his math homework, which the 9th grader needs to finish by the end of his radio show—a two-hour block sandwiched between wrestling and jazz band practices.

WMPH, "The Beat of Wilmington," is only one of six cities in the U.S. to have an around-the-clock dance music station, but its most distinctive feature is that it is a high-school run station staffed by students.

The program was developed under the direction of Clint Dantine who came to Brandywine School District in 1993 to head the Broadcast Learning Center, which includes radio station, a streaming internet radio station (WMPH 2), a film club, television studio, newspaper, and school web site. Dantine has been in radio and worked in television and film with Disney before coming to Delaware.

The radio station is located in the basement of Mount Pleasant High School near the Washington Street Extension but most of the Learning Center's programs meet after school or at night so any Brandywine District high school student can participate.

Many graduates of the Mount Pleasant program have gone on to be DJs, television, and other commu-



Photo by Andrea Miller
Ross Johnston (left) takes a break from announcing on the air at WMPH 91.7 with director Nick Catka (right) at Mount Pleasant High School.

WMPH DANCEFEST 2006

Saturday, November 18,
8 p.m. to 1 a.m.
at Baxter's Club
on Pennsylvania Ave.
in Wilmington

Tickets are \$15 at the door.
Guests must be 21 and
properly attired to enter

For more information, visit
www.wmph.org, the
school's website at
www.mphsknights.com,
or call the station at
762-7199.

nications professionals, but even the ones that don't have a memorable experience that increases their communication skills, confidence and willingness to try new things, Dantine says.

In the Wednesday night radio workshops, students and community members interested in broadcasting start the year learning the basics about Federal regulations and how to use the equipment. They have workshops on voice acting, public speaking and get a primer on preparing for a show.

Later, they will learn more of the mechanics of the broadcasting equipment, the business of the music industry, and even simulate a wedding recep-

tion to get practice as a mobile DJ. Throughout the curriculum, the advanced students get real world training as they each host a weekly two-hour show.

Every year, a few students take to it and really shine, Dantine says.

What makes a good DJ really depends on the type — whether sports radio, classical music, news, or top 40, Dantine says, but overall, the key is not so much your voice or your knowledge.

"The people who seem to excel are the ones that

have a passion for it," he says, and introduces senior Katie Tyrawski.

Before September, Tyrawski had never been in a sound room, much less live on the radio. She came to an interest meeting at the beginning of the school year, thinking it might be a good way to explore communications, which she was thinking of majoring in college.

A dozen or so on-air sessions later, she's applied to three communications programs, been a guest on Alan Loudell's WDEL show, and has generated her own listening audience with call-in requests.

On a typical Friday afternoon, Tyrawski arrives about 15 minutes ahead of her show time. She will check the internet for weather updates, do a voice track to warm up, and take a look at the playlist. She might throw in a celebrity birthday, tweak her signature sign-on or brainstorm what's going on in her life that she could bring up during her two-hour block.

Sometime during the year, she will probably interview a major label dance music artist like the ones who's LPs, CDs and autographed posters line the walls outside the sound studio.

"Normally, I'm pretty shy around strangers," she says, reflecting on becoming something of a radio personality. "But when I'm on the radio, I'm more willing to put myself out there, kind of be a little more creative."

For Tyrawski, as with most of the student DJs in the Mount Pleasant program, dance music wasn't programmed into her I-Pod or part of her CD collection before she started working at the station. But personal music preferences don't really matter in the industry, Dantine explains in a Wednesday workshop.

More important to a radio station, is sticking to a well-defined program, which keeps listeners, revenue and ratings up. WMPH is a dance format because it appeals to a wide demographic — men and women, all races, cultures and ages, Dantine says.

"I tell the kids you don't have to like the music you're playing as a DJ," he says. "For all intents and purposes we could be Delaware's polka station and the kids would learn to do just as well promoting it, because it's not about you and the music you like, it's about pleasing the crowd. By sticking to a format, you create a community of listeners. No one listens regularly to a station that tries to be all things to all people."

Learning to cater to the audience no matter how you personally feel is important as a professional, Dantine says, however, teens are passionate about music, so in the broadcast program they have other avenues to express themselves.

Unlike WMPH with its established format, WMPH 2, the 24-hour sister internet station, is eclectic and free-wheeling.

WMPH2 is really meant to be a starting ground where students can learn the equipment and experiment without being under the pressure of the main station's professional standards, he says.

"It is laid back and really whatever they want to put together. In fact, we encourage them to do goofy things they would never do on the real radio," Dantine says.

Most of the students who have their own show on the main radio station are upper classmen like Tyrawski, but Johnston and Catka are freshmen. A combination of talent and luck landed them a weekly spot on WMPH.

Dantine said Johnston's rush-hour performance, "was right on the money with the timing."

He said, "I encourage students to ad lib as much as possible because if you read a script verbatim, it's really going to sound like you're reading a script verbatim. But getting the timing right when you ad lib takes a while. The first time I did it in high school, I was horrible."

Johnston says the pressure goes away with practice, and it becomes a lot of fun.

"At first had no idea what I was doing and I was making monumental mistakes," he says. "But by the 3 or 4th time, I had stopped needing to think about everything, like what I was going to say and what buttons I needed to push."

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