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WCOJ ex-workers 'devastated' by firing

By ANNE PICKERING
10/02/2008

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WEST CHESTER — Former employees of WCOJ 1420 say there was little advance notice the station was being sold and they were all going to lose their jobs.

At a 3 p.m. staff meeting Tuesday, Ira Rosenblatt, the chief executive officer of the station, told the stunned group of about a dozen employees that the station had been sold and they were being terminated. Employees would receive a one-month severance package. They were told the locks on the front door would be changed at 5 p.m., but they could return later in the week to get their belongings.

"I was devastated," said Ron McNiell, the popular host of The Swap Shop for the last five years.

"All we knew was there was a staff meeting at 3 p.m. and by 3:02 p.m., we were all let go. We were all in shock."

Holy Spirit Radio Foundation, a Philadelphia-based Catholic radio group, announced the purchase of the station, which will begin broad

casting again on Oct. 7 at noon.

Robert Henson, who had been with the station for 14 years, including three years as the host of The Big Show, said he first got wind the station had been sold from his grandmother who volunteers at the Day Room at St. Agnes Church.

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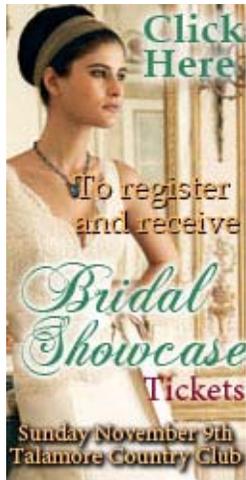
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On Tuesday, someone at the church asked his grandmother how he was doing, considering the radio station had just been sold.

He said he was able to do his last show Tuesday night, but an hour into the broadcast, a caller called to ask about the station being sold.

"The rest of my show were (callers) saying they couldn't believe it," Henson said on Wednesday.

The phones at the station have also been ringing off the hook. At 7 p.m. all 17 telephones were ringing and Henson said he was at the station for an hour Wednesday morning and all 17 phones were still ringing.

Henson said Tuesday was a hectic day but the shock of it was sinking in.

"I'm really feeling it today." He said he's received at least 100 calls on his cell phone and 1,000 e-mails.

McNiell said the loss of the station was going to leave a tremendous gap in the Chester County community.

"Regardless of the weather, me and Rob were at the station every day to give traffic reports, school closings. We had that dedication to pass information on to the community."

Mike Crossman, who had been the general sales manager at the station for the last year, said the manner in which the staff was laid off was "unprofessional."

"It's unfortunate that a 60-year-old Chester County institution was dumped," Crossman said.

"If we had been able to get the word out that WCOJ was in a selling position, maybe we could have found a buyer," he said.

Gene Mitchell, chief engineer and producer, also wished it had been more widely known the station was for sale.

His show, Computer Corner on Saturday mornings, has been an extremely popular show for four years, he said, and he was hoping to continue it either on the Internet or another station.

Mitchell said he has been asked to stay as chief engineer by the new owner.

WCOJ was owned by MS2K, a holding company owned by Waller-Sutton. About three months ago, WCOJ was part of Route 81 Radio, a chain of radio stations in Pennsylvania and New York owned by Waller-Sutton and Avalon. The chain went through a foreclosure proceeding in July and stations were sold off.

Henson said he was going to spend more time with his family.

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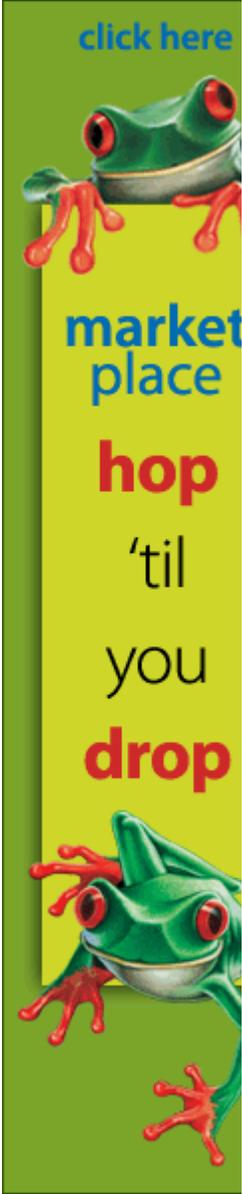
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Everything local is fading away

I still remember the great local TV and radio personalities (Gene London, Sally Starr, Captain Noah, Wee Willie Weber, Harvey) of the good old days. Slowly, bit by bit, they kept disappearing, as everything local and independent dissolves into big corporations.

We were fortunate that WCOJ was able to remain local so much longer than just about everything else! But, along with the rest of local media, it was bound to die off sooner or later. That's the way things are; I wish we could go back to the way things were, but we're not. And now the music industry is trying desperately to kill off independent internet radio stations too, since anything not under the control of big corporations is bad for business. It probably won't be long before KYW and WXPB are lost too. It is all very sad, but the only thing anybody can do about it is to try to adjust to the way things are now.

At least it's good that it was bought by a Catholic radio station; it could have ended up a lot worse! Our local WCOJ ceased to exist and nothing could be done about that. It is sad, but at least there is the slight consolation that what replaced it is something good.



Rick, Malvern, PA

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