

WTIP's Deb Benedict

Gives the North Shore a Voice

by Ada Igoe

You don't have to drive far up the North Shore to start receiving the signal from WTIP, a small nonprofit community radio station broadcasting from Grand Marais. Depending on what time of day you tune in, you might catch interviews with local government officials or community event organizers, volunteer-produced music programs, or a local high school sporting event.

Since WTIP first began broadcasting in 1998, the station has blossomed into a thriving local media outlet. One woman has been around to witness almost all of this growth and change, WTIP executive director Deb Benedict.

Deb came onboard as executive director in 2001. At the time, she'd recently moved to the area, after retiring from a career in home building in the Twin Cities. She joined the WTIP board of directors, and when the executive director slot opened, Deb stepped into the position, which she has held for nearly 14 years.

"I had experience running organizations, but no media experience," she says. At the time, the station was located in the Cook County High School, with local volunteers providing an hour or two of local news and music programming in the morning and

evening. The rest of the day, the station simply repeated KUMD's signal out of Duluth, whom WTIP had partnered with to get a community radio station launched in the small county of roughly 5,000 year-round residents.

Deb drew upon her previous business experience and financial knowledge to grow WTIP until it was ready to be its own entity, completely separate from KUMD. The station added a development director to apply for grants and help secure public funding. The station also joined AMPERS (Association of Minnesota Public and Education Radio Stations), an organization Deb



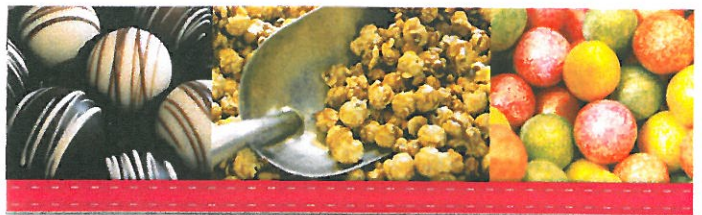
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now vice-chairs.

Slowly, WTIP established support and trust in the community, securing local business sponsorships and building up a community of listener members, despite the fact that in the early days, WTIP supporters had to call the KUMD studio to make a pledge for their local radio station.

In the fundraising days before WTIP became a reality, the organization was known as "Cook County Community Radio," but as soon as the station began broadcasting, organizers realized that the radio could bring together a much larger community than previously thought.

The broadcast signal reached all the way down the North Shore to Two Harbors, across Lake Superior to Bayfield, Wisconsin, and the Keweenaw Peninsula, up into Ontario, and, thanks to two translators, can be heard all across Cook County's rugged terrain. The result is an extended community.

"I think we have built bridges between different aspects of our community, our visitors to the area, our seasonal people, our locals, and newer residents with the large geographical area of our county. Our signal, [WTIP] provides information, entertainment, and connection to folks who live in outlying areas," Deb explains.

In its 16 years of existence, WTIP has transformed from a novelty to a community necessity. Deb says she personally realized the power of WTIP when she was on air, broadcasting a morning community events show when the terrorism attacks of September 11, 2001, occurred. "We really had no way to access information except for internet feeds and my mother calling, saying what she'd seen on TV," she says of that day's broadcast.

WTIP's news programming has become more sophisticated since then, today with a local staff of reporters and producers, as well as over 50 volunteers who host and produce programming. WTIP is now a go-to resource for dispensing information during major community events, a role that was solidified by WTIP's in-depth reporting during the Ham Lake Wildfire of 2007, which affected Cook County's upper Gunflint Trail community.

Also, in 2007, WTIP started a capital campaign to move into a 2,000 square foot office/studio on the outskirts of Grand Marais, allowing the station to further expand production. The new home helps the station to function as a community center with even a community garden on the far side of the station's parking lot.

"We're really an open door institution from which people come and go all the time: our volunteers to do their commentaries, our nonprofits, and our government people who come in to do their interviews. There are so many people cycling through here on any given day that it gives energy to the place," Deb adds.

Deb, who has served six years on the National Federation of Community Broadcasters, says she sees WTIP's role as both listening to the community and giving voice to that community. "I really think we have fulfilled and gone beyond the dream of what people had envisioned a local radio station would be." ❖

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