

# BUSINESS PROFILE

## Rick Johnson tunes in to lead public broadcasting into a new era

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Rick Johnson arrived as the new general manager for WGCU Public Media at a pivotal time for the Florida Gulf Coast University-based radio and television stations that broadcast throughout Southwest Florida

The WGCU 90.1/91.7 FM NPR station had switched its classical music program from FM radio to HD (digital) radio a month before Mr. Johnson started his new job.

HD is the wave of the future, Mr. Johnson believes, similar to what FM was when first introduced in the mid- to late-1960s. At 58, he says he's "chronologically advantaged enough" to remember that people back then wondered, "What is this new FM thing?" Now FM is the dominant format, and he predicts that's what will happen with HD.

Besides handling major changes to the public radio format, he runs WGCU-TV, the Web site www.wgcu.org and Expressions, WGCU Public Media's monthly magazine. He manages a staff of 45.

Mr. Johnson began his public broadcasting career in earnest after giving up on acting, which he pursued for a while in New York City. Tall and thin with a poetic face, he must have captured some attention on stage, but it wasn't meant to be. "I decided I didn't want to wait tables that badly," he said.

WGCU courted him because of his track record: 30 years in public broadcasting, culminating in 13 years as senior

vice president for the PBS/NPR station in Jacksonville, Fla. He was also the station manager at WFSU-TV at Florida State University and worked at public broadcasting stations in Seattle, Wash., and Albuquerque, N.M.

Regarding his first job in television broadcasting at an NBC affiliate in Green Bay, Wis., Mr. Johnson said he just wanted something interesting and didn't care if it paid a lot. That was back when he was working toward a bachelor's degree at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay. Since then, he's gained a wife and two children, as well as moved up the pay scale. But his reasons for coming to WGCU were similar.

"I wanted something that's going to be interesting and will hopefully make a positive difference in people's lives," he said.

Mr. Johnson was born in Germany, where his father was stationed in the Air Force. The family moved to Pensacola and then to Albuquerque, N.M.; Abilene, Texas; Omaha, Neb.; and San Bernardino, Calif., where he graduated from high school in 1968.

Ironically, after moving closer to the FGCU campus, he's now living hours from his wife and son in Jacksonville, in part so that his son can finish high school there, undisturbed by a sudden move. The Johnsons also have a daughter in college.

"For the time being, I am becoming very intimate with Interstate 75," he said.

Listeners have generally embraced the new format which plays classical music 24 hours a day on HD radio 90.1-2 and 91.7-2. Evidence of that includes the fall fundrais-



Rick Johnson  
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ing drive, which raised a record \$116,000 this year.

In spite of some folks' initial grumbling about purchasing a new HD-compatible receiver, the sound quality improved and the selection of classical music is far broader. Putting classical music on HD also opened up 90.1 FM for more popular programs like talk radio and other programming.

"What we faced as a station is what many public radio stations have faced," Mr. Johnson said. "Classical music listeners are dwindling."

New programs include a daily hour of the national favorite arts program, "Fresh Air" with host Terri Gross, and Brit-

ish Broadcasting Company news shows including "World Have Your Say," an international call-in program that will broadcast live from the Community Cooperative Ministries Soup Kitchen in Fort Myers on Thursday, Jan. 22.

Mr. Johnson's arrival at WGCU also coincided with a major change in television signals. WGCU-TV's public television station will switch from analog to a sharper, clearer digital signal along with the rest of the nation on Feb. 17. For some viewers, that means a new television or a converter box will be necessary.

Mr. Johnson and WGCU-TV are preparing for the transition in a number of ways. WGCU-TV is airing updates on Channels 30 and 30.1 and on Cable 3 and 240. It's also hosting workshops on Feb. 3 and 7 about the switch (attendance is free, but reservations are required and can be made by calling 590-2345).

WGCU-TV has led the way with digital TV in Southwest Florida, debuting three digital programs on Jan. 5. "I can't say enough about the engineering, programming and promotions staff that took that collective vision and implemented it in two short months, with the holidays intervening," Mr. Johnson said.

Although he said WGCU Public Media is already "an incredibly well viewed and well listened to and well supported institution," Mr. Johnson is ready to take digital radio and television "to the next level."

Thousands of Southwest Floridians — about 509,530 households with televisions and tuned-in radios everywhere — will be waiting, listening and watching. ■



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