

15 MINUTES

Good morning back at you, Mike Kiniry

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It's 6:19 a.m., and where is Mike Kiniry?

But first, a philosophic question: Is it true, as Aristotle said, that a thing cannot both be and not be in the same time and the same place?

The answer is no. Aristotle didn't have radio, and radio is where Mike Kiniry is.

Radio allows Mr. Kiniry to fold his long frame into a darkly upholstered chair surrounded by soundproof foam walls in the studio at WGCU-FM each morning, and be 100 miles of somewhere else at the same time.

Sitting alone, the photographer-by-passion, radio-host-by-trade clutches a cup of coffee and speaks to a mute microphone, while the sensors and their needles dance and flash in the machines shelved beside him.

Meanwhile his cheerful voice, a model of the soft Florida drawl, breaks the silence in every direction. It echoes gently across Marco Island, it drifts through Naples like a warming breeze on 91.7-FM, and it tickles early listeners abed or a-table or a-driving beyond, on 90.1 FM.

In that very instant, he is seemingly everywhere.

Thousands of men and women who anchor their lives to the gulf coast, like Mr. Kiniry, are greeted by the even-tempered, level-headed, completely

dependable icon of public radio.

"Good morning," he says. "This is Mike Kiniry."

When you hear it, it's hard not to reply, wherever you are: "Hey, Mike, good morning back at you. Need another cup of coffee?" And if you did, he'd be grateful, especially since he'll be delivering news and hosting cartwheels of topical conversation into the afternoon.

That takes energy, and it also takes passion, the kind Mr. Kiniry says he acquired only over time, and because of an accident.

None of this would have happened if he hadn't thoughtfully broken his leg during his freshman year at the University of Central Florida — not that he knew it or sought that outcome at the time.

He'd graduated from high school in Fort Myers, where he arrived at age 8 from Kansas City, gone off to college, joined a fraternity and showed up for an intramural soccer game. He was carried off the field, and the proverbial road of his life forked.

"I'd always wanted to leave for good, like everybody else," he recalls. But the accident led to his return home, where he worked in a bookstore for years (he's widely read), for a golf shop (he was once a highly competitive player who now estimates his handicap at about 10 and his opportunities to play at about once per year) and as a bartender, which he did to help earn a degree at FGCU.

At the university, though, something else broke — on this occasion not a leg, but his longtime desire to be elsewhere.

"In the colloquium class, we talked about environment, a sense of place and a sense of community. It all clicked in me at same time," he explains. "I thought, 'I want to rededicate myself to this place.'"

"I fell in love with my home. And when this job came along, I felt like I was pitching in."

The job arrived as an internship in which Mr. Kiniry's mentors and peers at WGCU, the veteran news anchors Amy Tardiff and Valerie Alker, recognized talent (his) and promoted it, they have said. But the instincts and the energy come sizzling into public radio via a Kiniry gene, apparently.

Either that, Mr. Kiniry surmises, or they come from the woman in his life, his daughter Guinevere, who will turn 4 in March.

Unknowingly, perhaps, Guinevere played a crucial role in anchoring Mr. Kiniry to his work in public radio last year, when her mother left him a few days before the couple were due to be married.

"I just thought, 'I can't be nuts, I can't lose my (cool) here. I have to make sure that everything that happens around Guin doesn't hurt her.'"

"Guin is my magical fountain of creative energy. She's the reason I knew I had to just suck it up, handle it and



COURTESY PHOTO

Mike Kiniry and Guinevere

move on. I was like, 'I still have to wake up and talk on the radio like things are OK.'"

So he did, refusing to surrender his passion for radio or his curiosity about the world — for example, he listens to talk radio hosts with ideologies ranging from the farthest right to the farthest left, always with equanimity, he says.

"And when things happen to you in life, radio makes it easier, in a way. That's your little safe place. At first, you're overwhelmed by who's listening. But eventually you say, 'I don't care about who is listening.'"

That's because it is what it is, a phrase that rings like a bell for Mr. Kiniry.

"I'm an It-Is-What-It-Is kind of guy," he says. ■

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