

INSIDE RADIO

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“Personalities INSIDE RADIO”

Borderless Expertise

by Mike Kinosian, Personality Editor

INTERVIEW with VALERIE GELLER:

The definitive book on the history of American radio would include this man's name close to the very top of a chapter dealing with controversial right-wing talk hosts who helped revolutionize the medium.

A twin-threat, his syndicated radio show was carried on hundreds of stations, and he capitalized on his immense popularity by doing a similarly formatted television show.

And his name isn't Rush Limbaugh.

In addition to allegedly packing heat for protection, Joe Pyne uttered some graphic catchphrases that did nothing but infuriate listeners. “Go gargle with razor blades,” for example, is one that's particularly colorful and memorable.

Many descriptions can be affixed to the chain-smoking, ex-Marine who died in 1970 at just 44, but “warm and fuzzy” isn't one of them.

Mad As Hell

A charming seven-year old girl, however, managed to penetrate Pyne's gruff exterior one night and it made for a highly memorable exchange.

Moreover, that conversation served as the impetus for the young lady to seek her own radio career, and she's advanced to become one of the most influential national and international Talk radio consultants. “Radio was in my blood from the get-go,” remarks Geller Media International President **Valerie Geller**. “I was an insomniac kid and listened to my transistor radio at night under my pillow. Joe Pyne was an outrageous Talk show host. My parents were nice, quiet and polite people and never talked [like he did]. It was absolutely wild to be exposed to something like that.”

One night, Pyne stirred the pot by doing a show about how children should be seen and not heard. They shouldn't be taken to restaurants, he bombastically observed, because they're too disruptive.

An upset Geller got out of bed, walked down the hall, called the number and was put on the air. “I told Joe Pyne that, when you're little, you're told when to go to bed, who to play with, when to go to church, what to wear and when to go to school,” she recalls. “Every single thing is dictated to you. I told him to leave us alone and let us make noise. It's the only thing we can do as kids to express ourselves. We talked for a few minutes and he [concluded] by saying, ‘Kid – you can call my show anytime.’ I was really hooked from then on. That's really how I got into the business.”

Two Key Credos

The Los Angeles native began her career as a radio journalist and worked as a talk show host, anchor and reporter for Los Angeles FMs KOST and KRTH, as well as KTAR-AM/Phoenix and KOA-AM/Denver.

“Tell the truth” and “never be boring” are the two rules she knows to be valid about radio. “If you can do those things,” Geller maintains, “the format actually doesn't matter. I like News/Talk, because it's for people who like to think. It's a human connection in a very special way.”

It was in 1988 when Geller's career reached a new peak, as she was one of the principal figures in transitioning KFI-AM/Los Angeles from music to Talk.

The zestful staff subsisted on a steady diet of pizza and literally camped out at the station around-the-clock.

Time Management

Soon thereafter, she landed the programming chair at venerable talker WABC-AM/New York. Rarely having the opportunity to listen to shows during the day, Geller confesses she'd take tapes home and listen while bathing at 11pm. “Rush [Limbaugh] would ask if I heard his show and I'd be so embarrassed to tell him I was in a meeting, doing corporate stuff, in union negotiations, doing budgets or meeting with the sales staff. You do everything but the creative work of helping people get better. Content is the part of the job I loved, but it's so easy to get bogged down with other stuff and it takes you far away from the thing that brought you to the fair.”

It was for that reason that the former KIOI/San Francisco News Director decided to take the plunge and become a consultant. “I offered to come in for no charge to work with stations,” Geller remembers. “[In my presentation letter], I wrote that, if they liked me and the station responded, I'd

ask for a one-year contract. But I went in free for the first few days.”

Seven such letters were sent out; five stations took Geller up on her offer. “Four signed me up and all four increased their ratings,” she proudly notes. “That was almost 14 years ago and started the trend of my track record. We’ve never done any advertising – my entire business is word-of-mouth. I work with about 500 stations in 27 different countries, but not all at once.”

Uncooperative Patients

At any given time, Geller attempts to keep a small, medium and large market station in the United States. “I want to have a sense of all three of those life experiences,” she remarks. “I have as much fun working with people at WLPO/LaSalle, IL as I do with stations in New York City. In England, LBC Talk Radio went from 90,000 listeners to close to one million in the first year. That was a result of the sheer power of the personalities. We’ve taken stations in Sydney and Melbourne [Australia] from 23rd to first.”

Assisting stations to notch significant and speedy ratings spikes gives Geller a rush, but she explains, “The most frustrating thing as a consultant is, you’re like a step-mom or substitute teacher. They’re not your kids and you can’t make them do what you know is right. Sometimes you’re like a doctor with the medicine that will cure the problem, but for whatever reason, the patient won’t take it. That’s what makes my blood pressure go up. It breaks my heart when someone won’t follow an action plan that has worked well [elsewhere].”

Simply staring at a typical Geller monthly itinerary can induce airsickness, but the world traveler always seems to be at home wherever she is. “[Other] consultants have told me about certain vitamins to take and we share stories about how to avoid getting colds,” notes the former Associated Press Broadcasters Board member. “If today’s my last day on earth, I want it to be a good day. I want to smell the flowers, walk in a garden or spend an hour in a museum. You find things that give you pleasure about each place you’re in.”

Real Life

A visit to Kenya, where she consults Nairobi’s Nation FM, produced one of Geller’s most unforgettable memories.

Complete poverty surrounded her as she walked to the station one morning. “I felt so sad for this one woman who obviously had AIDS and I dropped a few coins in her basket,” recalls a still shaken Geller. “There

were some street musicians there and when the music started playing, the woman put down her basket and started to dance. It was such a beautiful and moving thing to see the expression on her face and the life in her movement. As Americans, we get caught up in day-to-day things and forget to live in the moment. The secret of life is to live life and enjoy every day. This is real stuff for me. It’s my real life and not just my job. I love radio on a religious level. I don’t believe we do radio – I think we do people and life with a microphone. It’s the struggle to be human together.”

Admiration For Risk-Takers

Although deeply rooted in News and Talk, Geller enjoys listening to personalities in all formats and says she can laugh at snippets of Howard Stern, Rush Limbaugh and WBLS-FM/New York afternoon drive talent and Urban radio queen Wendy Williams. “I love humor, risk-takers and people who understand how absurd life is,” declares Geller, who has held a board seat for the Radio Television News Directors Association in California. “[Personalities] who are really in power are the ones who get what radio means to someone who is alone in a car or alone in a room. Those who understand how radio is used are the ones who are the best at it.”

The biggest industry buzz right now is Stern’s decision to segue from terrestrial radio to Sirius. It’s indisputably a gigantic shot in the arm for satellite radio, but as Geller opines, “The pressure will be on Howard because he needs to keep growing and moving forward as an artist. He has to stay hungry and not rest on his laurels; you’re only as good as yesterday’s show. He’s certainly built huge audiences for terrestrial radio and his job now will be to build a huge audience for satellite radio. It’s going to be a lot harder than it looks. He has a big mountain to climb and it won’t be as easy as flipping a switch. It could be very bad for [terrestrial] radio, but very good for Howard.”

Superior Talent Coach

Regardless of format, few people in the industry can rival Geller in the area of coaching talent. Humor is the first thing she looks for in an on-air personality. “They don’t have to be a comedian, but they sure have to know when to go for the funny moment,” she comments. “Every single person who is a huge star has a sense of humor.”

One respondent from a Stern research piece Geller recently examined wrote they’d listen to the morning star for three hours and 59 minutes because there’s the possibility of one laugh. “The person went on to

write that it wouldn't be a normal laugh, but the kind of laugh where the Diet Coke comes out of your nose," Geller remarks. "They'll listen all the time he misses the mark for the one minute where he hits it."

Being smart is another prerequisite for on-air talents. "You must have a high level of intelligence to do this work," Geller contends. "After that, you have to be a good listener. People think you need a beautiful voice and be a good talker. That's important, but it's really about listening. People on the air are artists and communicators. When they do it right, it's because they've observed life."

Developing talent doesn't always mean one has to scour the country to find new people. Sometimes they're right in front of you. "I enjoy helping 'B' players and taking them to the next level," Geller states. "I also like re-motivating journeymen talent who've been out there for a long time. The hunger may not be as deep for some people who used to be good 10-15 years ago, but they still have great minds and quick wits. We need to re-ignite their curiosity and passion."

Never Rusty

There are days when Geller finds herself pitching in at a client facility. "If I'm at the radio station and a hurricane is coming, every single human being from the consultant to the receptionist is working," she explains. "I've been around a few of those days in different places where you get a taste of it. I do miss being at a station and wrapping my arms around it, but what I'm doing now is very satisfying. It can't compare."

Still doing occasional voiceovers for friends, Geller from time to time also goes on-air under an assumed name. "I never want to get too far away from it or forget the feeling of sitting in front of a microphone," she comments. "I never want to ask an on-air talent to do something that I haven't felt. You can't speak about these things if your feet haven't been to the fire. Some of the best people in the business have been on the air and know what it's like. [Entercom's] Ken Beck and KOA/Denver PD Jerry Bell are fantastic on-air talents, and KGO/San Francisco PD Jack Swanson was one of the best on-air personalities."

Internationally Known Author

Firmly believing that people can find out who you are and what you can do by reading your book, Geller has authored "Creating Powerful Radio: A Communicator's Handbook for News, Talk, Information & Personality" and "The Powerful Radio Workbook: The Prep, Performance & Post Production Planning"; both are

available through www.nab.org. "Clients get to another level after reading the book and you can work with them in a different way," she claims. "I was flattered when a competing consultant said I shouldn't give everything away in a book. But if you give it away, you make room for new stuff to come through. If what you give away works, more work will come. We put everything we knew that worked into the books."

Africa transformed Geller in many different ways. It was in a shack made out of twigs and straw in Uganda where someone asked the consultant/author to sign one of her books. "The radio station had nothing more than a coat hanger for a transmitter," Geller explains. "It was a tiny station in the middle of nowhere and they came to me with copies of my book. The fact that book got all over the planet makes me very happy."

Positive Public Affairs Program

Another proud and rewarding accomplishment is her role as creative consultant on "Steppin' Out," a weekly syndicated public affairs program developed and masterfully overseen by veteran New York radio executive Denise McIntee. "It's been nearly seven years that we've put a 12-step meeting on the air," Geller points out. "The stories are riveting and we get emails from people who say the program has literally saved their lives. Not only can we do work in radio that's fun, but we have an opportunity to do projects that leave our campsite better than we found it."

With a third book coming in spring 2006, Geller can't imagine a life where she couldn't write. "It's hard to say [if I see myself doing consulting three to five years from now]," she notes. "I've never been good at looking into a crystal ball, but I know that in five years, I want to be working with creative people and want to do fun and challenging work. I want to be able to take what I know how to do and use it."



WHO: Valerie Geller
WHAT: President
WHERE: Geller Media International
HOW LONG: Since 1990