

Haverford has nation's oldest high school radio station

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Elizabeth Robertson/The Philadelphia Inquirer via AP From left, Zachary DiFonzo of Drexel Hill, Chris Denny of Ocean City and Jack Walsh of Broomall, get behind the controls in the studio at Haverford High School's WHHS radio station in Havertown, Pa.

By MARI A. SCHAEFER

The Philadelphia Inquirer, via AP

HAVERTOWN, Pa. — Deep inside Haverford High School sits WHHS (99.9) FM, a little 10-watt radio station with a 20,000-watt legacy.

The impact of the tiny, student-run operation extends well beyond the mile-sized broadcast range that circles the school's Main Line locale. It shows up

in community coffee houses, in corporate board rooms, political offices, and news organizations across the country. It even has a Hollywood connection.

WHHS-FM is the oldest high school-operated radio station in the country and one of only a few in the region. But more than that, it's a potent glue that bonds current students to decades of graduates, many of whom credit the station for their success in a wide range of careers.



Elizabeth Robertson/The Philadelphia Inquirer via AP WHHS 2019 General Manager Anya Winoski smiles in the studio at Haverford High School's WHHS radio station in Havertown, Pa.

Nowhere was this more evident than at a jubilant recent Friday night party to honor the station's 70th anniversary. The celebration was held at the school, where a giant red, black, and yellow balloon arch welcomed current and former radio staffers into the cafeteria, where displays of historic photos lined the walls. In the adjacent WHHS school studio, radio-club alums mixed with current staff, and members of the student board of directors took turns recording station-identification announcements to be aired later.

David Weston, 51, was one of more than 60 alumni who showed up to the party, traveling all the way from Miami, where he's an electrical and environmental engineer.

“Little did I know that (years later) I’d still be part of it,” said Weston, who not only pitches in to coordinate reunions but once helped save the station from extinction.

WHHS first broadcast on Dec. 6, 1949, after Haverford High’s then-Principal Oscar Granger applied to the FCC for a Class D educational license, which does not require the noncommercial station to keep a programs list. The station has since survived three moves to different locations during school renovations and three changes of channel on the dial.

But the biggest upheaval occurred around 2002 when Radio One, a major media company, wanted to relocate to the Philadelphia area. Since there was no protection for low-powered, noncommercial operations like WHHS-FM, Radio One was able to take over the frequency used by the high school. WHHS wound up being forced off the air for the 2004-2005 school year.

The move did not sit well with school alumni or the community.

Weston and fellow alum David Brouda filed opposing comments with the FCC to reinstate the station, *The Inquirer* penned an editorial in support of the school, and even Radio One offered to help get the students back on the air.

At the same time, on the other side of the country, U.S. Sen. Maria Elaine Cantwell (D., Wash.), was dealing with a similar situation in her district, where noncommercial stations were also vulnerable.

In 2004, she sponsored the *“Educational Radio Protection Act”* to shield low-power stations like WHHS-FM from commercial encroachment. It was signed by President Obama.

“The little guy succeeded through perseverance,” said Weston. Today, college, high school, and community stations can’t be forced off the air. As for WHHA, it was able to find a spot on the dial between two larger stations.

Through it all, the station thrived, said retired French teacher Ed Weiss, who was its faculty sponsor for 37 years.

“The radio community,” he said, *“is a wonderful group of people who watch out for each other.”*

Even from beyond the grave, apparently: This year's WHHS reunion honored alum David Shayer, who died in October 2017. His long, illustrious professional career spanned stints at WDVR-101.1 (now known as B101.1-WBEB), KBMS in Los Angeles, and KUMU in Hawaii. He bequeathed \$5,000 to the station. The donation helped fund the purchase of state-of-the-art equipment and soundproofing for the studio, said WHHS faculty adviser Kim Zeoli.

Like Shayer, hundreds of former WHHS kids have gone on to build broadcasting-related careers, in disciplines like journalism, engineering, writing, and directing, said Weiss. Bill Marimow, who used to broadcast basketball games for the station, went on to become editor of *The Inquirer* and vice president of news at National Public Radio. Another alum, Ross Katz, coproduced the award-winning movie *Lost in Translation*.

The club has also fostered lifelong friendships and is responsible for at least three marriages.

Aaron Muderick, founder and CEO of Crazy Aaron's Puttyworld, a toy company based in Norristown, credits part of his company's success to the public speaking skills he picked up in high school.

"I owe that to WHHS and the years of practice I had being 'live' and on the air," said Muderick. Covering local elections for the radio also set him up for his own political career as president of the Narberth Borough council, he said.

From their first days, the students are responsible for all aspects of running a radio station, said Weiss, the former faculty adviser.

"It's real work," he said, the hub of their high school experience. They radio staff spends countless hours together at the station and organize the fundraisers held at local coffee houses.

Senior Anya Winoski, 17, is the station's current general manager. She manages the staff, coordinates WHHS station operations with the administration, oversees the station budget, and has a hand in programming. Training the incoming club members and encouraging them is a big part of what the student directors do, she said.

“It’s just learning to work with people, really,” she said. The role the alumni plays sets an example for current students who are constantly encouraging their younger peers to get involved.

Aiden Mastronardo, 17, has been impressed by the amount interaction between the alumni and current radio staff. *“It’s always shocking to see how many people WHHS connects with,”* he said. At a car shop he uses, one of the older mechanics spoke fondly of how he and his friends, as students, would hang out listening to the station.

Today, he said, *“The alumni see themselves in (us) and there’s a lot of connection there.”*

Mastronardo, a senior who plans to study computer science when he graduates, is working on a broadcasting URL and developing an app so that WHHS can be accessed beyond the station’s broadcast range.

When Kirk Horvath, Class of 1993, walked through the door it brought back good memories of hanging out at the station with friends long after the final bell rang.

“Some of those people I haven’t seen in 10 or 15 years,” he said. Horvath, 45, worked behind the scenes as a WHHS engineer. It was during those years he fell in love with the medium. He now operates a ham radio as a hobby. He still lives in the area and occasionally tunes in *“just to see what’s being played.”*

That passion has been passed down from one class to another.

Now that Winoski, the station’s GM, is applying to college (she plans to study marine biology), she is making sure her potential schools have good campus broadcasting operations.

“I want to go where it’s an option to participate in the radio station,” she said. *“I didn’t apply to schools where it’s only for communication majors.”*