

Northern Blair

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Altoona Mirror

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Mirror photo by Patrick Waksmunski / Photo illustration by Nick Anna
Matt Lightner (left), owner of multiple Blair County radio stations talks with WRTA Talk Radio's The Eleventh Hour host Doug Herendeen at the Altoona studio.

Lighting up the radio dial

Claysburg native carving niche in area broadcasting business

BY WALT FRANK

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Electronics has been a big part of Matt Lightner's life since he was a young boy.

"I can remember back when I was in elementary school playing DJ on our big Zenith console stereo," Lightner said. "That thing was the size of a refrigerator and had a 8-Track player, record player and AM/FM Radio in it. My dad (Bill) really got me interested in electronics, computers and both ham radio and commercial radio at a young age. He actually worked at WKMC in high school, so I guess I inherited the radio gene from him.

"I bet he had no idea that his son would actually own the station he worked at in high school."

When he was 15, Lightner started doing repair work at WJSM-AM in Martinsburg. While in high school, he ended up in a co-op program where he would spend half a day in school, and the other half working as a broadcast technician at WVAM in Altoona.

When he graduated from Claysburg-Kimmel High School, he was promoted to chief engineer at those stations.

In the meantime, he also started Lightner Electronics.

"At first, I started doing contract engineering work for radio stations in State College and Johnstown, and then came employees and work across the country," Lightner said.

Spreading wings

Today, Lightner has evolved into a key player in the local radio industry as he owns six area radio stations.

"I might have had a slight feeling that maybe I'd buy a station some day, but I was happy being the behind the scenes person consulting for other stations," he said. "I guess the right opportunity came along, so I figured I'd give it shot."

"Matt has assembled an outstanding team here of industry vets, and we are all focused on providing information, entertainment and helping our community any way we can."

Bob Taylor, operations manager

His first purchase was WTRN-AM — branded as easy favorites 96.9 and 100.7 WTRN — in 2017.

"A few friends approached me and thought I'd be a good fit to buy WTRN as it needed a complete overhaul to survive," he said. "It was at extremely low power because of equipment failures, and they didn't want to see it go away because of how important it was to the Tyrone area. So after some arm twisting, I decided I'd give it a try."

Among the improvements was an FM signal that extends the station's range further into the region.

"From the building being in really poor shape, to the transmitter needing replaced, and all the studio equipment, it had to be modernized if it was going to survive," Lightner said. "I think one of the biggest improvements was the addition of the FM signals, as many younger radio listeners don't really know what the AM button does."

Lightner admits following the late Cary Simpson, who founded the station in 1955, as owner was a challenge.

"Cary was an amazing person and did so much for the Tyrone community," he said. "We try hard to continue to air as much as we can for Tyrone that he started, like still covering Tyrone football, Tyrone parades, local news, the Veterans Day celebrations and local church broadcasts. We did have to change some things, which was very challenging. WTRN had to expand to cover all of Blair County and beyond to survive. With all the costs that go into owning radio stations today with everyone wanting a piece

of the pie, Tyrone alone was not large enough to support the station anymore. So we had to make some changes, to still make Tyrone the major focus, but cover a lot of events all over the county."

Shannon role

Long-time broadcaster Dave Shannon joined WTRN as station manager in February 2018.

"He has given the market more quality choices in listening and more ways to listen to the stations he owns. He hired several key people who understand the importance of local broadcasting," Shannon said. "The biggest part is serving the local community. When you look at the staff we have, we have some of the best people you can find in the positions that are important."

Lightner's next purchase was WYUP-AM — branded as 107.1 JACK-FM — in Loretto.

"That station was in a similar condition as WTRN," he said. "It needed a lot of love, and I found out we could apply for a FM translator (107.1) and move it close to Altoona. Then I decided I was going to pick a music format that I really loved, that I discovered working for one of my clients. That was the JACK-FM format. JACK-FM really took off quickly. I had no idea it would be such a hit in our area so fast. It went from basically zero billing when we purchased it to being one of our stronger stations."

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Sales of sweet treats steady

Local candymakers surprised by customer loyalty

BY PATT KEITH

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Summer isn't traditionally a busy time for local candy producers, but they all say they are grateful for their customers' support.

At Bedford Candies, which has locations in the Pleasant Valley Shopping Center in Altoona as well as in Bedford, Easter sales were strong through their website, and while customer counts have decreased this summer, sales of their chocolates and sweet and savory popcorn remain steady, according to owner Tammy Wiley.

The Bedford location celebrates its 10th anniversary with a variety of specials throughout September and the Altoona location will share those specials with Blair County customers.

The business moved to its location in the Pleasant Valley Shopping Center in 2016 and added a Rita's Ice last summer. Rita's offers Italian ice and frozen custard, so if a family visits all can enjoy a cold treat, a savory popcorn or a chocolate candy.

Fall features popular pumpkin ice and pumpkin cheesecake flavors as well as Halloween-themed treats such as gummy kabobs, hocus-pocus popcorn and trail mix as well as popcorn in autumn spice.

"Our business is good and I am thankful for how good it is," Wiley said, adding that foot and car traffic seemed lighter than usual this summer. When the store was closed in April, customers used Bedford Candies website to place orders that could be shipped to them or family members, even though she and other candy makers said that the summer heat isn't conducive to shipping.

Curbside deliveries

Across the city at Dutch Hill Chocolates, 1624 First Ave., owner Jerry Moore said, "We've had shorter hours, but we've had a really good summer and been really busy. I think there isn't a whole lot to do and people aren't taking their normal vacations so they are taking their pleasures where they can. Our sales are up about 20% this summer."

At Gardners Candies in Tyrone, sales were also higher in July, compared with the same time frame last summer, according to President Joe DeStadio.

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Mirror photo by Patrick Waksmunski

Bedford Candies chocolate treats are displayed at the Pleasant Valley Shopping Center store in Altoona.



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RADIO: Large number of stations helps serve community

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Growth continues

In 2019, Lightner took over four other area stations — WRTA-AM, WKMC-AM, WBXQ-FM and WBRX-FM.

He also faced challenges with those acquisitions.

"Technically, it was very challenging to keep the stations on the air while we were doing so many technical improvements to both the studios and transmitter facilities," he said. "On the sales side, we took a much different approach than the past and had to work on many new packages and promotions that cover all our stations. Programming wise, we had to do a lot of changes to the formats to make them a little more competitive. So it's been challenging, but so far the changes are very successful."

Lightner recently returned WKMC - now branded as 1370 AM and 96.1 HANK-FM - to a country music format, which it played back in the 1970s and 1980s.

"Country music is huge in our area," he said. "We had a lot of people come to

us and say they loved country music back when country was country. They were referring to the major shift country music had starting around 2005 or so, where artists took some influence from hip hop, hard rock and electronic music and changed the sound of country music. This is sometimes referred to as 'Bro Country.' So we thought there was a major hole in our area for a slightly older country music format.

"So far, judging from the response, it has been a major hit. HANK-FM (WKMC) plays country music from the '80s to 2000s and even throws in some real classics at times."

Sports options

Lightner hopes to add more local sports programming to his stations.

"With the pandemic limiting the amount of people in the stands, our plans to do some more local sports got put on a fast track," he said.

"This year, we are doing football from Altoona, Bishop Guilfoyle, Hollidaysburg and Tyrone. It has been a big logistical puzzle to try to coordinate doing all that

at once, and it's changing every day with COVID-19, but we are looking forward to airing four teams this year."

Without a doubt, he said, the pandemic has been Lightner's biggest challenge as an owner.

"When buying the additional four stations back in October, no one could have foreseen COVID and the huge effect it would have on local businesses, including ours," he said. "I expected to be doing more local news and have some more local programs on than air than what we are doing now, but we have to be very careful as the revenues are down, like most businesses."

"Second to that, I'd say is finding enough time to devote to the stations. I own Lightner Electronics, which takes a great deal of my time since I'm so involved in many of the technical aspects of that company."

Bob Taylor, Lightner's operations manager, said his boss is the perfect owner for the local stations.

"Of the prospective buyers of all of the stations Matt has acquired, he was likely the only one that

"I feel local radio is going to be here for a very long time."

Matt Lightner

would put the kind of local focus on them he has. Most other radio broadcasters are eliminating staff and local programming," Taylor said. "Matt and all of us respect and try our best to continue the values of former WTRN-Tyrone owner Cary Simpson who demonstrated that serving the communities we operate in is of the utmost importance, and we strive to maintain those values. The rich history of WRTA and its commitment to local information is important to Matt, and he's made it clear to us that growing in that respect is important to him."

Lightner feels good to be an owner.

"I'm very happy that everything came together to allow us to do this so close to home," he said. "I feel we are in a much better place having a group of sta-

tions in our market. This allows us to streamline advertising packages and operational consistency to put out a great product across all our stations."

Lightner, who also serves as chairman of the State Emergency Communications Committee and serves on the board of directors of the Pennsylvania Association of Broadcasters, is optimistic about the future of local radio.

"I feel local radio is going to be here for a very long time," he said. "Radio is changing, with audio content available on the internet and satellite radio. That is why it's going to be more about content and producing local programming to engage local listeners. However, traditional radio is not going away. It's reliable and just works when you want to hear it."

Taylor agrees the future is very bright.

"These stations have the best owner they could have," he said. "Matt is so knowledgeable not only in all aspects of broadcasting but in business. His other company, Lightner Electronics, is highly

successful, not only in the broadcast industry, but also in audio/video systems for area churches and businesses. The two businesses compliment each other in many ways. Matt has assembled an outstanding team here of industry vets, and we are all focused on providing information, entertainment, and helping our community any way we can."

Doug Herendeen, host of WRTA's The 11th Hour, serves as midday announcer on WTRN, and afternoons on HANK-FM, said Lightner's impact on local radio is just beginning.

"He's a local guy who wants to keep the stations' focus on quality local programming," Herendeen said. "He's already expanding what Dave Barger and every previous owner of WRTA has built. He's started bringing more people into the stations, like Jim Price returning to Q94 and Danice Bell joining Mix 94.7. Now that he has a larger group of stations, he can really serve the community and its listeners even better."



Mirror photos by Patrick Waksunski

Bedford Candies owner Tammy Wiley of Bedford puts together a custom box of chocolate treats in the Pleasant Valley Shopping Center store in Altoona. At left, Wiley bags caramel and milk chocolate gourmet popcorn.

SWEETS: Customers buying more

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"We didn't expect that at all. We took a big hit at Easter time so it was a pleasant surprise. We have a good core of loyal customers who are buying regardless," he said. The Tyrone location has an ice cream parlor, but to comply with restrictions, employees are taking online orders and delivering curbside.

"The ice cream business has been a nice shot in the arm," DeStadio said. Gardeners' website features photos of different sundaes and ice cream concoctions as well as the option to buy a flavor by the pint, quart or

half gallon. Customers pay online and select a pickup time.

MarCias Chocolates, 122 Greenwood Road, will open in late September, after taking its traditional summer break, said owner Marcia Cumming.

"This fall we are planning to re-open and offer curbside pickup," she said. During the spring season, she said she noticed people were buying larger quantities per visit.

"Customers who would normally buy a 2-pound box were buying 6 pounds to 7 pounds. The volume people were buying was blowing

my mind," Cumming said.

She also plans to offer delivery service closer to the Christmas holiday because it proved successful for the Easter season.

"We're a small shop and make chocolate using my grandmother's recipes," she said, noting the shop's seasalt caramel, peanut butter meltaways and nonpareils are their most popular sellers. "Our seasalt caramel is smooth and soft and doesn't stick to your teeth," she said. "We do a smaller line, but we do this because these are the recipes that people like and we stick to what we do well."

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