

Making the switch

The Kaplans are publishers now—and they don't miss radio

By JEFF BORDEN

Special to ELECTRONIC MEDIA

CHARLOTTE, N.C.—Missing from the black Rolls-Royce is a license plate carrying the call letters WROQ, but little else has changed for Stan and Harriet "Sis" Kaplan since they sold their local radio stations for \$13 million.

Mr. Kaplan still enjoys wheeling, dealing and talking, his trademark fat cigar always close at hand.

Mrs. Kaplan still immerses herself in every detail of their business, rarely glancing at a clock.

But their business at hand is no longer radio.

After a highly successful broadcast career that established them as radio industry leaders and innovators—and eventually saw Mrs. Kaplan emerge as a nationally prominent industry leader—the husband-wife team now toils in the world of publishing, of all things.

A free weekly newspaper, the Charlotte Leader, has replaced radio as their personal and professional passion. Neither Kaplan claims to miss radio.

"After 35 years in the radio business, I'm a little surprised I don't miss radio at all," says Mr. Kaplan, 61, the Leader's publisher and president.

"I'm not suggesting I don't think about radio," adds Mrs. Kaplan, 53, the newspaper's vice president and general manager, "but I really don't miss it. I was ready for something new."

Mrs. Kaplan's radio roots, by the way, run especially deep. Her father, H. Leslie Atlas, once owned Chicago's WBBM-AM, now a CBS property.

The Kaplans had sold one of their radio stations, WAPE-AM in Jacksonville, Fla., years ago, but it wasn't until last December that they withdrew completely from radio by disposing of their Charlotte properties.

The latter sale capped a successful and flamboyant odyssey that had brought the Kaplans to Charlotte more than 21 years earlier, in April 1965, when they bought WAYS-AM for \$550,000.

The station, which has since been redesignated WAES, wasn't a serious contender in the conservative Charlotte market.

WAYS had 5,000 watts of power during the day—and only 1,000 at night—to do battle with market leader WBT-AM, a 50,000-watt clear channel giant whose programming included the likes of "The Arthur Godfrey Show" and paid religious broadcasts.

With the Kaplans in town, Charlotte didn't stay stodgy for long.

The couple promptly turned WAYS into "Big WAYS," a rocker fueled by the burgeoning popularity of rock 'n' roll music, jive-talking jocks and outrageous promotions.

Disc jockeys who came through the station en route to bigger jobs in bigger cities include Jay Thomas, now morning man at KPWR-FM in Los Angeles, and Robert Murphy, who now knocks down mega-bucks in morning drive for NBC-owned WKQX-FM in Chicago.

Armed with such talent, and enlivened by occasional bursts of sometimes-contrived controversy, WAYS became the station that exposed a generation of area listeners to the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and various Motown acts.

The suddenly alive station captured swarms of listeners, many of them young, and zoomed to No. 1 in the ratings, a position it held for years while competitors scrambled to find an antidote.

In the meantime, Mr. and Mrs. Kaplan established the working formula they still use. She worked predominantly inside the station, tending to programing and operations. He worked mostly outside, as a highly visible, frequently combative spearheader of sales and promotions.



Photo by Jeff Borden

Harriet "Sis" Kaplan (l.) and her husband Stan sold their radio stations to devote their efforts to their free weekly newspaper, the Charlotte Leader.

"There's no question that Stan Kaplan woke this market up," says Cullie Tarleton, a former WBT radio manager who is now vice president and general manager of WBTW-TV, Charlotte. "He was a thorn in my side, but he forced radio in this market to join the 20th century."

Harold Hinson, another former WBT manager who is now a consultant in Cleveland, said it was the Kaplan challenge that drove WBT to develop one of the nation's first adult contemporary formats.

"He made things more exciting," Mr. Hinson says of Stan Kaplan. "Publicly, we fought like hell, but I told him many times 'I love you.' It was good, clean fun and it really kept the pot boiling."

In 1972, the Kaplans increased their Charlotte radio holdings by purchasing 100,000-watt WROQ-FM. That was shortly before FM listenership exploded, so the station cost the couple just \$310,000.

As the fortunes of AM and FM radio eventually reversed, the new acquisition became the mainstay of the Kaplans' operation, evolving from progressive rock to album rock to contemporary hits.

Meanwhile, the AM station went through several metamorphoses, including a poorly received news/talk/information format in the early 1980s that Mr. Kaplan says is his biggest disappointment in radio.

Viewed broadly, the Kaplans' now-concluded trek through radio reflects almost all of what the medium has gone through, from Arthur Godfrey

to the Beatles, from AM dominance to FM dominance, from stations worth thousands to stations worth millions.

As for where the medium now stands, Mr. Kaplan is not entirely pleased, and he says so with typical bluntness.

"There have been a lot of changes in recent years that have irritated me," he says. "The number of new stations in the market really puts the first-rate operator at a disadvantage because price becomes an issue."

"For many years, I've decried the fact that we have the worst audience measurement mechanism in the history of the world. Now there are four ratings books and I still don't think they accurately measure anything."

"And the broadcast business itself has spent almost no time training good people. With seven or eight times the radio stations there were, you have a lot of amateurs in the business."

Mrs. Kaplan doesn't completely agree with her husband on the subject of ratings, but she adds, "I'm sorry the industry never got together to control its destiny in a way that isn't antitrust."

She worked hard to raise the profile of radio and to separate it from the shadow of television.

Mrs. Kaplan's efforts to that end included support for and leadership in the National Radio Broadcasters Association, an organization that sprang up separate from the National Association of Broadcasters (which embraces TV as well as radio).

Mrs. Kaplan served as a board member and president of NRBA. She says the

organization, which has since merged with NAB, played a significant role in a great deal of deregulatory actions.

"There's no question that we accomplished a lot of things," Mrs. Kaplan says. "We were able to extend license renewals from three to seven years. We were successful in separating radio from television in the minds of legislators."

"We worked very closely with (FCC Chairman Mark) Fowler on deregulation issues, but we weren't successful at codifying those efforts. A future FCC could change what we accomplished."

She was often frustrated by the industry's lack of interest in things that didn't directly pertain to the bottom line, such as First Amendment rights.

"The (broadcasting) industry is extremely weak... it has no idea of its power and influence," she says. Still, Mrs. Kaplan asserts, radio is home to many "bright and talented people."

Mr. Kaplan isn't so sure: "I think there are far too many satellites, far too much automation, far too much emulation and not enough innovation... but I'd be the worst kind of ingrate if I said I was disillusioned by the business. I don't regret a thing."

While the newspaper is the focus of their professional lives now, the Kaplans aren't newcomers to publishing.

Fourteen years ago, they began publishing a weekly, distributed to 40,000 homes on Charlotte's affluent east side. Editions aimed at south, north, west and downtown areas followed.

Nine years ago, the Kaplans became full-fledged publishers with the purchase of offset printing presses.

Two years ago, Mr. Kaplan recalls, "We decided to get serious about the newspaper and launched the Leader."

The Charlotte Leader is delivered to 149,000 homes. Like their WAYS of old, the newspaper is faced with a dominant competitor. Although the Charlotte Observer, a Knight-Ridder morning newspaper (214,000 daily circulation; 270,000 Sunday circulation), is a favorite target of Mr. Kaplan's verbal barbs, he doesn't see any way to beat it.

"Radio is always secondary to television. A weekly is always secondary to a daily," Mr. Kaplan says.

Adds Mrs. Kaplan: "The idea is not to be a little Charlotte Observer. We want to be the best Charlotte Leader we can be."

The Kaplans' move into publishing has not been without bumps. A catastrophic fire last May could have put the Leader down for the count.

Last year's blaze, which was started by a damaged extension cord, wiped out the 10,000-square-foot newspaper facility and destroyed 12 printing presses.

Damage was estimated at \$1.5 million but, typically, Mr. Kaplan found a couple of bright spots.

"We never missed a week of publication," he says. "And it may have helped the quality of our paper."

"Now, we're being printed on a multi-million dollar press in High Point, and the newspaper looks better. And the outpouring of sentiment gave us some indication of (the Leader's) value to our readers."

Mr. Kaplan said he wants the Leader to become a prototype for a new breed of weeklies.

"If our weekly is conceptually different and better than what passes for weeklies in similar cities, the opportunity is there to move on."

"That's one of the great things about publishing. There's no government involved. If you want to start newspapers up in 50 towns and you have the time and the energy and the money, you can do it."

"We think we're going to build one helluva enterprise." #