

CHARLOTTE WRIGHT STREMLER

TALKS THE HEART OF THE RADIO STATION; AND NAVIGATING SMALL MARKET RADIO THROUGH 2020

By Alex Parry



Charlotte Wright Stremmer

The impact of 2020 on the Nashville music industry was substantial. In February, a tornado ravaged through parts of Middle Tennessee, destroying homes and businesses in its path. Shortly after, tours came to a halt and music venues closed their doors as the COVID-19 pandemic made live music impossible.

Small market radio and its community were not immune to the challenges of a natural disaster and a global pandemic. Radio executive Charlotte Wright Stremmer spoke to *MusicRow* about how she and her team stepped up to the challenge in 2020, and what makes her stations stand out.

Stremmer co-owns a conglomerate of stations known as Radio 7 Media, as well as the parent company Prospect Communications, with her father Roger Wright, who started the company 40 years ago.

Located in Lawrenceburg, Tennessee, she manages 25 employees who run four full-powered radio stations including WKSR, WDXE, WTNX, and their flagship simulcast station WLX (WLLX/WXLA). They occupy 17 radio signals that broadcast through Southern Tennessee and Northern Alabama, reaching over four million listeners. The staff also includes a full-time meteorologist to run their dual polarimetric doppler radar system. The formats of the stations vary from classic rock, '70s funk, to classic country, with WLX playing a range of classic to modern country. Stremmer describes her listeners as the "heart of the radio station."

"We program a lot of our music around our listeners, as opposed to just telling them what they're going to listen to," Stremmer says. "We have live DJs from 5:00 a.m. until 7:00 p.m. They're able to pick music that they want played and people call in and request songs all day long. As long as it fits within the format, we try to play [requests] to let the people be a part of the radio station."

While the pandemic did change how staffers conducted business, including when the staff caught COVID, it didn't stop them from connecting with new artists and new music on WLX. Host Steven Jenks, for example, works out of a small window studio in an antique shop in Columbia, Tennessee. This allowed him to continue operations including radio interviews and on-air artist visits.

"From when WLX first signed on the air in 1981, the business has evolved considerably not just in the past few years, but even the past few months," says Stremmer. "From the way we get our music to the way music is made, I find some things are different but some things have stayed the same. It is still all about a song and it is about the people. I love the radio industry because of how we affect and change lives. I love the small market because of the personal interaction we have with our listeners. We see how music changes their lives. A lot of what we do affects them."

Foremost, Stremmer's duties extend beyond the operations of the stations. The conglomerate has always been major in its contribution to its community. In 1987 it was a cutting edge in-

studio color weather radar, which worked early on to fill the gap in federally operated radar coverage in Southern Tennessee and North Alabama. From then on, the station has been front and center in raising money for storm relief, charity events, and food, toy, and necessity drives.

“I was always taught that if you have the ability to help people in need, that is just what you do,” Stremler says. “In February of 2020, three tornadoes struck within the core of our listening area without warning and tracked within a mile of the station’s Lawrenceburg studio building. This prompted a response from the station unlike anything before, in raising funds through a newly formed 501(c)(3) and then building a brand new dual polarimetric doppler radar. The radar’s data is directly shared with the National Weather Service in Nashville and Huntsville and is the only radar actively used by broadcast media in Middle Tennessee.”

During this process, the station led a collection to aid counties affected by the tornadoes resulting in two semi-trucks full of supplies. In April, the largest food drive in Lawrence County history was organized in conjunction with Second Harvest Food Bank to provide 1,500 boxes of food to listeners who were experiencing unemployment due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“When somebody called [the station] and said, ‘I just lost both my jobs, I just need some food,’ I stopped what I was doing and went into overdrive to plan a food drive,” says Stremler. “My employees and I put down our jobs [at the station] and started

grocery shopping and collecting money. We changed everything we did like a paradigm shift to help those in need. We just wanted to make sure that we could pass on any help we could give to the community.”

In June, the Tennessee Valley Weather Center was launched from inside the WLX studios. The new weather center is home to the first-of-its-kind digital TV weather channel that specifically serves Southern Tennessee and North Alabama. They finished out the year hosting the annual Santa for Seniors drive which serves over 600 families each year in their coverage area who are less fortunate or alone during the holiday season.

Stremler’s laser-focus on local communities has been a massive help to many of her station’s listeners. While many large market stations have opted for non-local programming, she is a firm believer in keeping the human connection alive on the airwaves with her on-air personalities.

“Listeners will often tell us stories about how our personalities are woven into the very fabric of their everyday life,” added Stremler. “Seeing the results of what we do makes it all worth it and keeping personalities on the air connecting with our listeners daily is what sets us apart from many other stations.” *MR*

