

College radio station working hard to stay 'live' during pandemic

By Tim Leininger

Tleininger@journalinquirer.com

HARTFORD — When colleges across the nation shut down because of the novel coronavirus pandemic, WRTC-FM had to devise a way to continue live broadcasting from its Trinity College base.

“We had to suddenly change our programming,” said Chris Cowles, station general manager.

All the students were sent home, he said, which made things difficult for the station because they lost all of their student hosts.

That’s when DJs from the community and other stations stepped in and either extended their regular time slots or took over empty slots to fill in the gaps, keeping in mind safety measures that had to be maintained.

WRTC-FM, which recently celebrated its 73rd anniversary, is the one of the few non-commercial stations — and the first non-commercial radio station in Hartford — to be on the air staffed by live hosts instead of going to an automation, or “auto pilot” format.

“The number one concern is safety and the station was well ahead of the curve,” said Joseph Palladino, an engineering professor at the college and WRTC faculty advisor.

“Even before Trinity College went to remote learning, they implemented strict policies. There’s only one person allowed in the facility at a time, that’s the DJ. No guests allowed. Anybody who wasn’t comfortable didn’t have to come in. Once we went online, no students came in. It’s all community members. It’s all volunteers.

“I think it’s exciting the station is still live,” he said. “We have a lot of community member DJs. We have a Portuguese show and a Spanish show. We have been deemed an essential service provider. I think the station has been doing a great job continuing to provide as close as possible, 24/7 programming.”



Chris Cowles / WRTC

Station manager Chris Cowles, left, and Gus Smith of Windsor are continuing to host their regular radio programs on WRTC-FM in Hartford during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Trinity College radio station is working hard to keep live programming on the air for 24 hours a day while the students are off campus during the pandemic. At right are scenes from the studio.

The station carries 65-70 different shows each week. One of those shows is hosted by Cowles a veteran newsman, whose Greasy Tracks is the longest-running blues/soul show in Connecticut and will mark the start of its 26th year in May. The program airs 3:30-5:30 p.m. on Saturdays.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, hosts have done interviews with physicians helping to lead Connecticut’s medical response and state representatives who have detailed how the government has been responding. In addition, regular spots are dedicated to COVID-related updates and other news.

Between each show, Cowles said, the studio is disinfected and wiped down.

“We have a five-minute (public service announcement) that we play in between shows,” he said. “That helps the person that leaves ... and the person that comes in. We’re basically in a lockdown situation. It’s a skeleton crew at best. There might be a person in the production studio but that’s a whole room away. The place is cleaned regularly. Trash is removed on an almost daily basis.”

For one DJ, the change hasn’t been too much of an inconvenience.

“It really hasn’t changed too much,” said Gus Smith of Windsor. Smith’s alter ego is Mr. Sweet & Sour, who hosts PM Jazz Mondays from 3 to 6 p.m.

“I’m wearing PPE,” Smith said, adding “It’s usually a one-man show.”

Smith said he occasionally brought guests onto his show, but with new restrictions, he can no longer do that and all interviews have to be held over the phone.

A 32-year employee at Connecticut Natural Gas, Smith has been hosting his jazz show for WRTC for over two years.

“They’re willing to work with me on a fluctuating schedule,” he said of his employer. “It’s a great company I work for. Right now I’m working from home. It makes it easy to get to the station on time.”

Smith said he is doing well in spite of the virus.

“You get your ups and downs as you go through this every day. This is something we’ve never seen. We knew this wasn’t going to go away. I’ve got support from my wife, from my daughter, from my friends. I call a lot of people. You’ve got to have

some faith in something.”

His show focuses mostly on classic jazz and artists like Miles Davis and Roy Hargrove, but will also feature doo wop artists and the occasional classic rock track.

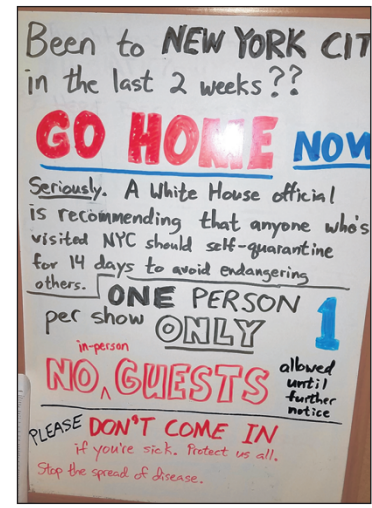
He said he wants his show to help people through the pandemic.

“They tune in because they want to get their mind off everyday news,” he said. “We try to uplift the audience. Every hour we try to put out (the) PSA. You take life serious enough. What we want to do is bring you back to positivity and relax. There’s not much more to what we do. It’s stressful enough. It’s been a rough time for everybody.”

Cowles said the hosts have reported a huge surge in call volume from listeners, many just thankful to be hearing a “live” DJ instead of pre-recorded programs or shows that are being re-aired by other outlets.

Most listeners live in Greater Hartford, but its online stream is picked up around the world and hosts are regularly getting calls from across the country from listeners, Cowles said.

“One e-mail that we recently received from an out-of-state listener basically said, ‘Thanks.



WRTC is helping sustain me lately as I’m shut in my home,” Cowles said.

Cowles said he isn’t sure when things are going to return to normal for the station.

“We don’t know anything yet,” he said. “Will the college be open in the fall? Will students be back on campus? We’re trying to stay on air 24 hours a day right now, but we can’t have our students in the facility. It’s a wait and see. It might be a month, it might be a day, it might be six months. We don’t know. We’re feeling our way along and just being as responsible as we can.”

Until then, he encourages everyone to be safe.

“Take care of each other,” he said. “Don’t forget to laugh. We’ll get through it. We hear people saying that all the time. We’ve faced challenges in the past. This is a new one; a different one. We got to continue on the best we can, make the best of it, be smart, be wise, and add some music to your day.”