

One-woman show does convention for 75 stations

Story: KATHY PARRISH
Photos: DAVID FRANK

Ever been all alone at a couples party?

That's how it was for radio reporter Shirley Smith at the Republican National Convention.

While other members of the media traveled around Detroit in pairs — and often bunched — the Kentucky Network news director was on her own without even a car.

Competing against stations with the newest audio equipment, she kept the Blue Grass State posted all week with two cassette tape recorders, a telephone, portable studio board and a "mile of wires of various sorts" which she repaired herself.

"It seemed everyone else had somebody," said Ms. Smith, who prepared six 4 1/2-minute broadcasts for her listeners daily.

"Monday I wouldn't have given a nickel for this. But now that it's over, I want to do it again."

One of only 22 statewide radio networks in the country, the two-year-old Kentucky Network supplies Kentucky news, sports and agriculture reports to 75 subscribers around the state.

"Kentucky has a lot of small stations and to them we're it," said the Louisville resident. "Many have no wire service or even weather reports — nothing."

MS. SMITH'S job last week was to follow closely the Kentucky delegation, headquartered in Northfield Hill, Troy.

Although she put together a segment on campaign buttons, most reports dealt with delegate reaction to convention issues like the Equal Rights Amendment — a hot topic at home.

The Kentucky Network had a "real scoop" July 16 when the group drew up a proposal to draft Gerald Ford for vice president.

"That got everything moving, and I had it before anyone else," said the thrilled reporter, whose first journalistic coup was an interview with astronaut John Glenn when she was a high school sophomore.

"I sort of stalked out the place he was speaking at. I don't remember what I asked — probably something really dumb," she recalled. "But everyone was so pleased I got the interview. It was really neat."

Ms. Smith also reported on the delegates tour of Stroh Brewery, a piece "everyone in the station laughed at."

But affiliates from around the state called Kentucky Network to compliment her work and comment that "it sounds like Shirley is running her butt off."

COVERING THE NATIONAL convention was a big commitment for Kentucky Network, which has a versatile staff of six.

"Everyone does everything," said the news director, who also does news reports during afternoon drive time.

The network will be clear of debt and make money for the first time this year. It recently acquired radio rights to University of Kentucky basketball games, which stations all over the country will pick up.

"We're thinking more big stories," explained the 36-year-old, who won a Louie award for public affairs broadcasting while at a smaller area station. Although the Motor City trip was planned for months, problems developed immediately. As soon as she arrived in Troy, Ms. Smith realized she had the wrong audio adapter for her microphone and had left her headset at home.

"I couldn't hear my cue; I had to time it with a stopwatch," said Ms. Smith, who carries her equipment in a battered brown leather suitcase.

She bought new equipment, but the table and chair she ordered had been taken by another reporter. She located them, but every day would go to her Cobo Hall work area and "someone else had the chair."

Although she is soft spoken and believes in "everyday good manners on assignment," Ms. Smith had no trouble getting her interview.

"I'm not nearly as aggressive as I'd like to be, but won't lose a spot when I'm interviewing someone."

"IF I SURVIVED this week, I can survive anything," said Ms. Smith, whose technical problems were the most frustrating part of her trip. By the end of the week, she was automatically whipping a screwdriver out of her case to adjust wires.

But she was also amazed by the magnitude of the convention. "It was just huge," she said. "I was extremely overwhelmed the first day."

Preparing six broadcasts daily left no time to see anything but the Northfield Hillton and convention area.

Luckily, the Kentucky delegates were all readily available for interviews.

"They would sit and talk anywhere we went. It was super."

A 1970 Murray State University graduate with degrees in English, journalism and speech, Ms. Smith worked on a weekly newspaper before going into radio.

She wrote for radio and was a disc jockey, a job she liked because of the "fun and recognition."

A little old lady knitted me house slippers," she recalled.

But determined to get back into news gathering, she bounced around to find a job she really liked — even working two jobs at a time in order to get her foot in the door.

Married 11 years to her high school sweetheart, the head of in-school security for Jefferson County Board of Education, she admits their life is "hectic."

"But I've just always been me. We're coming up on 11 years and it's always been hectic," she says.

She signed on with Kentucky Network two years ago, being named news director last fall.

"I've never been in a place where I was happier. This is what I want to do."



Wiring her equipment was a job that came automatically by the end of convention week for Shirley Smith, Kentucky Network news director.

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