

Community Upbeat taps into social issues

By Victoria Day Neijer
special writer

Producers Sharon McDonald and Denise Swope are the duo behind the informative talk show, "Community Upbeat."

With diverse backgrounds yet similar thinking, these women have blazed a trail on cablevision that has brought them national attention and many local awards.

"We laugh because we seriously live three lives and work 24 hours a day. I have never worked harder or enjoyed myself more in my whole life," McDonald said.

The philosophy of Community Upbeat is to be educational and informative, positive and upbeat, to motivate citizens to become actively involved in their community because it is only through active involvement that communities can become a better place," she added.

McDonald and Swope believe that television is a "fantastic medium" to initiate social change because it reaches so many people.

"There are a lot of things that need to be changed in this world. Community Upbeat differs from an ordinary talk show in that we take social issues and want to motivate people to change, spark something in that person to go out and get involved in their community. Positive thinking is behind everything we do on the show," McDonald said.

SOME OF the diverse subjects handled on "Community Upbeat" are education, health, art, finances, substance abuse prevention and nuclear disarmament. The newest undertaking by Swope and McDonald is the production of 4 1/2-hour-long videotapes on the rehabilitation of the

Rouge River. These educational films will be shown in many local classrooms as part of the school's curriculum as well as on cablevision.

Swope and McDonald attracted the talented Terry G. Kelley, a nationally renowned documentary and feature film producer to co-produce the Rouge River project films.

"It's become a larger project than cleaning up the river. It's bringing people together — all working for a common cause. It can be an example to other communities in the nation that when they get behind a project, anything can be achieved," McDonald said.

The producers pride themselves on keeping an open mind for future shows. "I am always looking for things that come up that I think need to be addressed," Swope said.

"It's funny because for just getting into this in the last couple of years, we find we are right up there with the major stations on the subjects that we tackle," she added. "We did a month-long special on substance abuse before the president proclaimed drug awareness as a national concern. It's interesting how one story seems to lead to another; everything comes back to us."

"We carry notebooks with us everywhere," McDonald said. "Many people we deal with are unique and are stories themselves. They don't have to be a famous personality and that's the beauty of it."

McDONALD, an educator who until recently was a science teacher for Plymouth-Canton Schools, has been hired by Clarenceville Schools as cable production specialist. "Everything works together," McDonald said, "even my political experience has benefited me. My husband, Jack, is an Oakland County

commissioner who has served Farmington and Farmington Hills for 12 years.

"I have managed his political campaigns. Just recently, I was elected precinct delegate 'A' in Farmington Hills. I attended county and state representatives conventions representing my neighborhood."

On interviewing, McDonald said, "Most people think that you just get up there and talk to somebody, but interviewing is difficult; sometimes the person is too talkative and it is difficult to break in with questions. 'I try to keep the interview on course. There's timing — I had an interview with a skidrow bum. I only had eight minutes to bring out his dynamic story. There was so much to tell."

Anyone interested in the media is invited to intern for Community Upbeat.

"We had three college girls who were interested in majoring in public relations. They worked hard for us on a volunteer basis to gain experience. We taught them how to use the camera and how to write press releases," Swope said.

"Their first story made the Observer and Eccentric. If anyone wants to come aboard, we are glad to have them. For example, we can always use someone to bicycle the stories (cabletalk for someone to drive the video tapes to various cablevision studios).

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influenced her most, McDonald said, "One of the people I interviewed was Jeanne Findlater, vice president and general manager of WXYZ-TV. I really admire her because of the types of programs she presents on her channel. I feel that she really does show she wants to make Detroit and its surrounding communities a better place. We're on the same wave length."

Swope said Southwestern Oakland Cable executive director Lark Samouellian is a woman whose "enthusiasm and knowledge have a way of making things happen. I once went to her to find out where to proceed. She was three months ahead of us in her ideas and they all made sense. I find Lark Samouellian inspirational."

Smiling, Swope added, "We have a disaster before every show. October is Substance Abuse Awareness Month. We weren't sure what we were going to do on substance abuse; our time frame was from noon to 4 p.m. We had everything scheduled. Every 15 minutes a different guest was supposed to arrive. The last minute, I found we only had from 1-3 p.m. We had to cut two hours out and fit all those people in."

EACH of these women is mother of three, the difference being McDonald's three are teenagers and Swope's preschool and lower elementary age. It makes for interesting conversation. It is precisely these differences that serve to make these women a good team. Their tal-

ent and skills mesh; McDonald is a skilled on-camera interviewer, Swope a skilled behind-camera director. Their future show plans include a senior-citizens show.

"They are a forgotten part of our society and I'd like to show them in the many active roles they play. Life doesn't end with retirement," said Swope, whose consciousness has been raised by her recently retired parents.

McDonald and Swope rave about their present sponsors without whose assistance no show would be possible, but admit that corporate sponsors could help make more programming dreams come true.

Community Upbeat is aired on Channel 12 in Farmington, Farmington Hills and Novi. It is also broadcast in 50 other cities in this area; consult your local listings.

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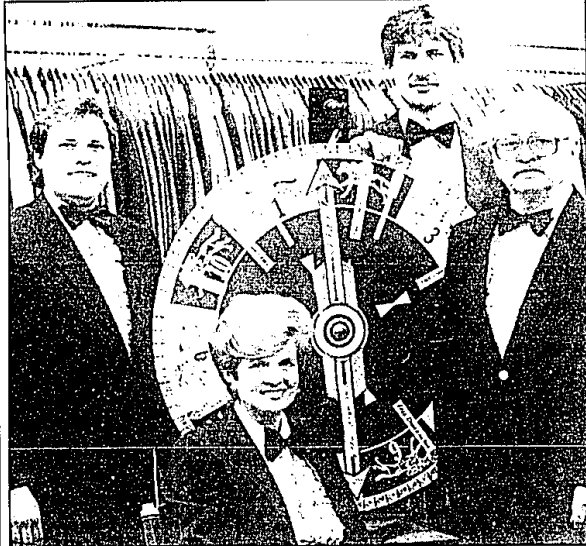
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