

Thursday, June 25, 1981

Sonya's holding her own as TV host

By Ethel Simmons
staff writer

In the male-dominated world of talk show hosts, TV personality Sonya Friedman is establishing her own territory.

"Not many women host their own shows. It's the role of the man as host," she said in a recent interview at P.J. Clarke's, the Birmingham restaurant she owns.

"Not many women are permitted to have credibility. Who besides Barbara Walters can you name?"

"They're never going to love me the way they love Donahue!" she said with self-assessing candor.

The slender, attractive blond with the soothing voice always has a ready answer. That's one of the things that has made her so successful in her career as a psychologist.

FRIEDMAN'S credentials in the field of psychology are what helped her develop her radio and television career. A determined realist, she has worked hard to succeed and presently balances an afternoon radio show along with her daily TV show.

A West Bloomfield resident, married to a doctor at a Pontiac hospital, she still continues to see some clients at her psychology offices in downtown Birmingham near P.J.'s.

"I'm still married to the same man. We met when we were 14," she said when asked about her marriage. But Friedman doesn't dwell on the personal side of her life, instead preferring to explain her work and goals.

A highly organized individual, Friedman was busy addressing cards while waiting for the interviewer to arrive at the restaurant. She doesn't have too many spare moments.

During the interview, she munched a bran muffin, one of the healthy, natural foods Friedman prefers and which her restaurant specializes in.

THE TELEVISION show "Sonya" started only six months ago on WDIV-TV, Channel 4. The radio program, in

which she has a different role, has been going strong for 2½ years and is on another station, the ABC-owned WXYZ radio.

Talking about the distinction between the two shows, she said, "In one I'm an expert. In one I'm a host."

Radio listeners get full-out advice from Dr. Sonya Friedman, who gives sensitive, practical help over the air to radio callers. No subject is too intimate to be discussed, but Friedman manages to be pointed with her comments without using any offensive, or overly clinical, language.

Describing the TV show, she said, "All shows on 'Sonya' attempt to problem solving." As host, she deals in "provocative subjects" including religion, sex, and violence.

"I try not to get into ratings," Friedman said. A WDIV-TV spokeswoman reports "Sonya" has more women viewers in the 18-49 age group than Phil Donahue.

"Donahue" and "Kelly & Company" are some of the heavy competition the show faces, but "Sonya" has steadily increased its share of audience, according to the WDIV publicity source.

The show, with celebrity and expert guests, is broadcast live before a studio audience. On camera, Friedman wears softly feminine dresses and casually sophisticated hairstyles.

OFF CAMERA, she's likely to be in her jogging suit mornings when she puts the show together and evenings when she winds up many workdays with a workout in aerobic dance at Vic Tanzy's in Birmingham.

"I really don't find it a grind," she said simply of her schedule that could drive less-disciplined persons into a frenzy.

Asked how a typical day goes, Friedman said she gets up between 5:30-5:45 a.m. and goes to bed between 10:10-10:30 p.m.

Mornings, she packs lunch and makes breakfast for herself and her husband. A fresh salad and fruit is the lunch she enjoys because it keeps her energy high.



Sonya Friedman talks with her guest, Ben Thomas of the NBC-TV daytime series, "The Doctors," during a recent broadcast of "Sonya" on Channel 4.

She leaves the house at 7 a.m. to arrive at WDIV in downtown Detroit, where she does her makeup and "someone helps me with my hair." She changes from her jogging clothes into what she calls "real clothes" for the show.

Before showtime, however, a meeting begins at 8:30 a.m. with other staff people involved in the production. The hour-long show starts at 9:30 a.m. and is followed by a meeting to go over the next day's show.

THEN IT'S OFF to WXYZ's studios in Southfield, where she eats her lunch and looks for story ideas in the newspapers she peruses daily: The Eccentric,

the New York Times, the Detroit Free Press, the Detroit News and the Oakland Press.

The radio show is a three-hour stint, starting at 1 p.m., but she handles it with assurance and calm.

On Mondays, Friedman goes back downtown to a production meeting at WDIV-TV, Channel 4, which is over by 7 p.m.

As a psychologist in private practice, Friedman is not presently conducting any ongoing psychotherapy. "After 17 years I might be taking a sabbatical," she said.

She does have a few clients, whom she helps with problems of everyday living. "We work as a team. I don't see

them as sick. I see them as people."

Friedman's dream is someday to have a clinic where she would counsel women who are struggling to achieve their independence but need help getting started. She believes many women in the Birmingham area would like such help and may not be able to pay for it.

HER SUCCESSFUL radio and TV career might enable her to offer this free service, Friedman hopes.

Always into many different projects, she is planning to introduce a line of Sonya T-shirts, which will bear "a group of Sonya-isms." She would like to have the T-shirt buyers wear a statement about how they feel.

Three years ago when Friedman was

a special correspondent on ABC Network News, the boss then told her that her voice wasn't right for the medium.

But a WXYZ radio executive liked the sound she projected and hired her for her current radio show.

Said Friedman, "People have said my voice has an emotional range. My daughter says when she turns on the radio, she finds my voice soothing."

Friedman credits her own mother-in-law with inspiring her to continue her education and to keep striving toward high goals.

"I've been battling all my life. I've admired people who had the guts to carry on even if it was unpopular," she said.

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