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Radio man gives back to community



JEFFREY M. SMITH/TIMES HERALD

A radio sits on a desk at Larry Smith's home in Fort Gratiot. Larry Smith retired last year after 44 years as longtime vice president and general manager of local radio stations, now RadioFirst.

By CATHY BARRINGER

Larry and Kathy Smith have always been on the same wavelength. The Fort Gratiot couple's deep roots and lengthy careers have allowed them to tune into ways to help the community.

Larry, 69, retired last year after 44 years as longtime vice president and general manager of the local radio stations, now RadioFirst, while Kathy, 62, has been employed for over 40 years at Port Huron Hospital, now McLaren Port Huron.

"We've been able to both discuss what's going on and help each other with a crisis or challenge," Larry said. "We've always shared that. We're always very visible in the community, so we have that in common."

"It was just natural for us because of our jobs and what we feel passionate about in the community," Kathy said. "I think it's a responsibility, too, because you want your community to grow and thrive and you have to put some energy there."

Larry, a 1963 graduate of Port Huron High School, took general business classes at St. Clair County Community College before later teaching a sales class there. He sold advertising for the Times Herald newspaper for over a year before he turned that dial.

"All the guys in radio seemed to be having a lot more fun," he said.

Larry was hired as a salesman at the local radio station, 1450 WHLS-AM/107.1 WSAQ-FM, in 1970.

He said early on, he was assigned to do hockey broadcasting.

"I worked with a guy named Mike Emrick," Larry smiled. "He is still a very good friend of mine."

Emrick, who began his professional sports-casting career in Port Huron in 1973 when he was hired to do play-by-play for the Port Huron Flags, is the lead announcer of the NHL national telecasts for NBC.

"Mike always introduces me as



Both Larry and Kathy Smith are deeply entrenched in the Blue Water Area

Larry and Kathy Smith are pictured at their Fort Gratiot home.

JEFFREY M. SMITH/TIMES HERALD



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Family photos line the wall at Larry and Kathy Smith's home. They live in Kathy's parents' former home and have raised four adult children. They now have 10 grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.

his first color man," Larry said. "He is a unique individual and world-class guy. He's worked very hard to get where he's at, which is at the very top of the broadcast world."

Larry later was appointed as sales manager by former station founder, owner, president and general manager John Wismer, who passed away in 1999.

The Smiths had considered purchasing the radio stations, but Wismer Broadcasting was acquired in 2000 by Radio First/Liggett Communications, which also purchased Hanson Communications including 1380 WPHM-AM, 96.9 WBTI-FM and 1590 WHYT-AM (now WHLX).

Kathy, a 1971 graduate of Port Huron Northern, said she was just 5 years old when she made up her mind that she was going to be a nurse.

"My mom was a nurse," she said. "People tried to talk me out of it, but I knew very early on in life that I was going to be a nurse."

She attended SC4 and received

her nursing diploma from W.A. Foote Memorial School of Nursing in Jackson in 1974. She later went on to earn her Bachelors of Science in nursing from Graceland College in Iowa in 1994 and Masters of Science in management from Walsh College in Troy in 2001.

Kathy began working at Port Huron Hospital in 1974 in obstetrics/pediatrics and has assumed various leadership and management positions over the past 30 years. She is currently director of ambulatory and clinic services, but the majority of her work has been in maternal child and women's health services.

"That remains constant," she said. "That's really where my passion is."

Kathy said her role has evolved over the past 40 years along with the hospital.

"We've stayed on top of technology and changes," she said. "We started as a community hospital, and we're still a community hospital. We have great physicians,

nurses and staff right here. I think we've done a great job as a community hospital. I think we've managed to do that very well."

The Smiths said the radio station and Port Huron Hospital have been longtime partners over the years. Larry also has served as chairman of the Port Huron Hospital Board for eight years.

"The hospital partners with a lot of other organizations, too," Kathy said. "They do good work, and it's important to our community. It's just another vital piece to a healthy community."

The hospital and radio station paired up for Breast Cancer Awareness Month as well as Salute to Youth, a radio spot that recognizes the area's brightest students.

Larry said running the local radio stations went far beyond the airwaves with such extracurricular activities such as the Blue Water News Network daily newsletter; Bridal Show; Home, Sport and Garden Show; Vacationland Book; annual country music concert; and its websites.

He said Port Huron's small radio market is unique.

"Operating a radio station in Port Huron is a lot different than operating a radio station in other cities," he said. "You have to be totally committed to your community, and many large radio stations have become jukeboxes."

"If someone robs a bank in Port Huron, that's a big deal and we've been able to report that," Larry continued. "The Capture Program has had tremendous success in capturing bad people. You can't do that everywhere, but you can do it here."

Larry has been instrumental in the development of major fundraising efforts and community events such as Cops and Jocks dinner that raises reward money for the Capture Program, Be a Tourist in Your Own Town, and especially WSAQ's Roof Sit for Kids which benefits the St. Clair County Child Abuse/Neglect Council.

"I had to convince Wismer, but 20 years later, it's really a wonderful thing," he said of the roof sit. "Our goal was to educate and fundraise. Of all the things we've accomplished in 40 years, if there was one thing that was hands-on that I helped create, that was it."

Larry also serves on the United Way Board, Tri-Hospital EMS, Michigan Association of Broadcasters, Blue Water Fest steering committee, and YMCA Gus Macker. Kathy serves on the SC4 Foundation Board and YMCA Experience Committee.

"When you walk away from these things, it's gratifying years later," Larry said. "You have to give back to your community if you want your community to become better."

"Both of us have been very fortunate," he continued. "To being in the media business in the same town for 44 years and with Kathy at the hospital for 40 years, no one stays with anyone for 40 years anymore."


The Smiths have lived in Kathy's parents' former lakeside home on Lakeshore Drive for the past 26 years and have four adult children, Jeff, Nicole, Courtney, and Lawren (Nate) Ruiz of Port Huron; 10 grandchildren including Romen Ruiz, 5, and Dominic Ruiz, 12; and four great-grandchildren.

"We never ever take this view for granted," Kathy said. "We really enjoy it here."

Longtime members of Grace Episcopal Church in Port Huron, Larry and Kathy stay busy in their "spare" time golfing, spending time with their grandchildren and boating.

They hope to travel more in the future, although it will be hard to beat their last trip — five days and nights riding aboard the 1,000-foot Paul R. Tregurtha freighter from St. Clair to Duluth, Minn.

"We don't have a lot of down time," Larry added. "There's always something going on we're involved in."



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