From teen radio reporter to early-bird UPR host, alum has plenty to say

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LOGAN—Not many people can say they started a career before they could drive. But Kerry Bringhurst says she doesn’t always do things typically.

At age 14, Bringhurst learned to balance junior high and full-time job as a reporter for the local radio station in Vernal, Utah, her hometown. Now, the USU JCOM alumna is the news director and local host of National Public Radio’s “Morning Edition” at Utah Public Radio.

“‘As an eighth grader, the news director asked me and a few of my friends if we would be interested in working at the radio station full-time after school,’” Bringhurst said. “Honestly, I thought I would be cleaning toilets or something. I never imagined it would be an on-air job.”

Her routine was to dart out of school at 3 p.m. to make it to work on time, and then get home by 9 p.m.

Attending meetings and interviewing grownups was a new experience for her, but she learned quickly.

“I would do the newscast, interview people, go to the city council meetings,” she said. “It was such a great experience.”

Bringhurst, who has four boys, says she can’t see her 15-year-old son taking on the same things she did.

“I think about him doing something like that,” she said. “It pretty much blows my mind.”

Vernal had population of around 10,000 people at the time of Bringhurst’s debut as teen reporter for the city’s only news radio station.

“Because it was such a small community, everybody knew when I made a mistake, but everybody was so helpful, too,” she said. “I remember this one time in particular I was interviewing the state senator from Vernal, and I didn’t tell him I was recording what he was saying prior to the interview. He kindly told me I need permission before doing that. He taught me a big lesson in a kind way.”

Aggie alumnus John Dimick, now vice president for radio for the Lincoln Financial Group, worked radio with Kerry Bringhurst when both were USU students. Photo by Ted Pease

Mackenzie Hamilton, a sophomore journalism major from Providence, also got an early start in the radio business, working while still in high school for the Cache Valley Radio Group. She is now assistant news director and afternoon news co-anchor at Utah Public Radio, and says she has become very close to Bringhurst.

“I knew Kerry before she was my boss, but there are times I have had some pretty bad days and she will sit me down and we’ll talk about it,” Hamilton said. “She is almost like my second mom.”

UPR accounting assistant Tamara Smith said the work Bringhurst puts into her career is what has created her success.
“She is extremely dedicated and hardworking,” Smith said. “She is always busy helping the people she has hired as reporters to do their job the best they can.”

UPR accomplished a huge task this past year during the election season with the Vote Utah 2012 campaign, a joint effort of media organizations across the state, Bringhamurst said.

“Utah Public Radio posted the most stories of any public broadcast organization in the state, and I am really proud of that,” she said. “We were super busy, but it was such an important subject, especially with the new congressional district and all the other races like Senator Hatch, Mia Love and, of course, [we were also] busy covering what was happening in the world.”

Bringhamurst said UPR believes in involving students in big sections of their program, not only for experience but because students with the willingness, knowledge, and determination can get their foot in the door early.

“We give students the opportunity to gain practical experience, earn credit towards classes and also to support their local radio station,” she said. “The majority of our funding comes from our listeners, so we can’t afford to hire a lot of reporters. Students have the opportunity to step up and learn a lot.”

Unlike commercial radio stations, UPR does not air advertising. Saving listeners time is what public radio strives for, Bringhamurst said.

She said having UPR reporters spread out across Utah makes their stories extremely diverse, and brings stories from small communities to all UPR listeners in the state.

Funding to underwrite all this comes from UPR listener-members, and companies who want to reach the public radio audience. “We have underwriters, which are like sponsors, but on-air they only say their place of business and that they sponsor and support UPR,” Bringhamurst said. “We have reporters in Moab, Vernal, Salt Lake and Cedar City” and members from Kenab to Preston.

Bringhamurst’s fondest memory of her years as a broadcast journalism major at USU were the many hours spent in the basement of the Animal Science building, which was home to the JCOM Department for more than three decades. The editing room was no larger than a broom closet, she said.

“It was always nice to know that Aggie ice cream was right above the editing bay in that same building,” she said. “So I ate a lot of Aggie ice cream.”

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