

SLB Radio Productions offers students in the Pittsburgh region opportunities to have hands-on experience with operating studio equipment and developing programming. Above, Executive Director Larry Berger shows 14-year-old Dinasia, a Big Brothers Big Sisters participant whose last name could not be released, how to operate sound equipment and allows her to fade music during a live broadcast. Below, Mr. Berger conducts a live, on-air conversation with Venture Outdoors youth program director Lo Hutelmyer, center foreground, and children in the Center that CARES after-school program about the importance of outdoor activities. Students' family members look on in the background.

AIR TIME

THE NEARLY FOUR-DECADES-OLD SATURDAY LIGHT BRIGADE RADIO PROGRAM NOT ONLY PRODUCES SHOWS THAT APPEAL TO CHILDREN AND TEENS BUT ALSO HELPS STUDENTS LEARN MEDIA SKILLS — SOMETIMES RECEIVING NATIONAL RECOGNITION FOR THEIR WORK. BY MALIK VINCENT

Tucked away in the rear of the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh's basement theater is a radio studio, complete with sound operating boards, microphones and monitors that industry pros use.

And sometimes running almost all of the equipment—in fact, mastering almost all of the equipment—are local youth, with several producing award-winning programs that have been heard in communities across the country.

Guiding the work of these budding radio journalists and personalities is the staff of SLB Radio Productions. Founded in 1978, SLB produces “The Saturday Light Brigade” radio program, which includes acoustic music, interviews, performances, puzzles and on-air call-in conversations that taken together have yielded unique youth radio programming for nearly four decades.

SLB also develops and conducts off-air workshops for schools, scout and youth groups, and after-school programs. As one of the longest-running public radio programs in the country, it serves about 8,000 youth per year and has a listening audience of about 60,000 families in 15 Pennsylvania counties, portions of Ohio and worldwide through www.slbradio.org.

Support from the broadcast industry, foundations, corporations and individual donors enabled SLB to open a \$250,000 broadcast studio and training complex in the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh in 2004. Today, SLB provides museum visitors with the opportunity to observe and take part in live broadcasts.

“It was really groundbreaking stuff for us,” said SLB Executive Director Larry Berger about the museum location. “The move gave us more physical space to be able to expand the amount of equipment we had and to do more with our programs.”

The Heinz Endowments began partnering with SLB on youth radio projects in 2009, starting with the production of radio documentaries as part of the foundation's Summer Youth Philanthropy Internship Program. Held annually, the internship program allows recent high school graduates from across the region to learn about philanthropy, make recommendations for grants, and offer a teen perspective on the Endowments' grantmaking practices.

Mr. Berger and Wayne Jones, senior impact officer for the Endowments and former head of the foundation's internship program, came up with the idea for the youth philanthropy radio project after meeting in 2008 at a children's media conference at Saint Vincent



College in Latrobe, Pa. The next year, SLB received a \$13,000 grant to produce original radio podcasts with the youth philanthropy interns.

“We wanted to find more creative ways to incorporate the voices of our youth interns,” Mr. Jones said. “There was a two-to-three-week gap in the [interns’] grantwriting process that Larry and I wanted to fill with media production that would complement the students’ grantmaking.”

While the summer radio project has been successful in terms of engaging students, the program’s achievements reached new heights with the national recognitions that the work of several of last year’s interns received. First, the radio documentary “#BlackGirlsMatter: The Criminalization of Black Girls” by former youth philanthropy interns Marna Owens and Amma Ababio was selected for broadcast on two national public radio programs: “51%,” a 30-minute program devoted to women’s issues, and

adults. “An Unlikely Oasis in Johnstown, PA: Tranquility Gardens” highlighted a unique and secluded park in the small town east of Pittsburgh where the combination of nature, art and inscriptions of wisdom from noted philosophers has created a premier destination for youth mentoring sessions and retreats.

“The field of journalism and media is evolving every day,” Mr. Jones said. “When mapping this out, Larry and I wanted to be innovative in the way that students got their messages out there.

“We knew at the time that podcasts were becoming popular. The emerging technology helped shape our approach to telling the interns’ stories.”

The other youth radio program that began as an Endowments–SLB partnership and has expanded to include other supporters is the Crossing Fences oral history project, which was launched in 2012 as part of the foundation’s African American Men and Boys Initiative. Crossing Fences’ main objective is to assist black male youth in identifying and getting to know adult role models in their communities while learning how to use digital media to tell the men’s stories. So far, the project has trained more than 130 youth in nine neighborhoods to record and present oral histories of more than 140 African American men.

“We’ve sent out youth as young as 10 and as old as the late teen years for five or six days to get the stories,” Mr. Berger said of the Crossing Fences participants.

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“PRX Remix,” a nationally curated compilation of the year’s best new public radio work. The students’ radio feature investigated why and how the socioeconomic challenges, behavior norms and trauma that some African American girls experience have caused them to be penalized in school systems rather than receive the support they need.

“It was truly an honor and a privilege to be able to be a part of something that would reach so many,” said Ms. Owens, a sophomore at Penn State Behrend. “Living it was the sole motivator of wanting to expose these issues, but it was beyond my expectations that it would end up being so powerful.”

Two other youth philanthropy radio projects from last year garnered the Best Youth-Made Radio of 2015 designation from the Public Radio Exchange (PRX). “Recognizing Refugees: Pittsburgh’s Somali Bantu Students” provided vital details on the assimilation and independence of local Somali teens and young

adults. “It has been a really good way to get the boys to identify and acknowledge men of all different walks of life... Throughout the process, we do our best to train the young men on how to use the equipment, edit the audio and everything that is needed to complete their projects.”

Neighborhoodvoices.org houses all of the Crossing Fences programs as well as interactive slideshows with photos of the students at work. Full-gloss, full-color booklets are produced as part of the project and contain written stories of these neighborhood heroes. Audio CDs also are enclosed as part of the packets. This year, the students’ radio interviews also have been made available nationally through PRX, with some already featured in cities like Seattle.

The annual public release of the Crossing Fences oral histories has included a citywide reception recognizing the students’ work and smaller gatherings in the individual communities where the interviews took place. Local dignitaries and other community stakeholders have taken part in the larger event in past years.

“SLB has effectively used the participants’ voices for a number of community-engagement opportunities,” said Carmen Anderson, senior officer for the Endowments’ Children, Youth, & Families Program and head of the foundation’s African American Men and Boys Initiative. “The opportunity for the youth to hear life stories and perspectives from community elders while gaining the technical skills involved with capturing the experience will prove valuable to their development moving forward.” **h**



RADIO HEAD

BY MALIK VINCENT

In 1976, the Pittsburgh Community Broadcasting Corporation's WYEP-FM, an independently owned and run station, had only been in operation just over two years, but it would soon give birth to a local radio icon.

It wasn't certain that Larry Berger, then 14, knew that a successful and decades-long career in public radio was to come. But he realized that there was something missing from the station's programming.

"There was a lack of active voices from youth on the radio," Mr. Berger said. "Also, there wasn't a whole lot of interesting content on Saturdays. Many times, stations didn't seek premier talent to work on Saturday mornings, with the assumption that everyone was sleeping in."

As an intern at the time, Mr. Berger developed a passion for broadcast radio. He used his opportunity at the station to learn the ins and outs of what would, eventually, become his dream career.

"I had a great interest in the equipment," he said. "The electrical components and all of the things that made a broadcast were awesome. Just the imagination that's needed in listening to the radio was something that really drove me."

Using a problem solver's approach, he analyzed his concerns about what he wanted and created "The Saturday Light Brigade" (SLB) radio program just one year before his 1979 graduation from then-Churchill High School, now known as Woodland Hills High School. But his life wasn't completely geared toward radio — yet.

With his love of science, Mr. Berger enrolled in Carnegie Mellon University, where he graduated with a degree in chemical engineering. And he somehow found ways to juggle college classes, further develop professional radio skills, and expand and maintain SLB over the years.

"One of the things that worked best for the SLB program was that many types of youth were consuming it," Mr. Berger said. "Kids actually woke up on Saturdays and caught it getting ready for and on their way to their football games, for example. It was something unique, and people started to embrace it."

Aside from working tirelessly to produce "The Saturday Light Brigade's" award-winning content, he enjoys listening to jazz and reading non-fiction. His favorite? "The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less," a 2004 book written by acclaimed psychologist Barry Schwartz that examines consumerism in America.

Mr. Berger and his wife of 27 years, Rikki, live in Avalon, a Pittsburgh suburb less than 10 miles north of Downtown. "My wife does a lot of the behind-the-scenes work with SLB," Mr. Berger noted. "She screens phone calls for the hosts and does a lot of the things that go unnoticed by our audience."

Veteran local television and radio host Chris Moore described SLB programming as "interesting. It makes you think, and it's positive." He had a similar assessment of Mr. Berger.

"He's got the same gentle manner as [Fred] Rogers," Mr. Moore said. "His programming brings a wide variety of knowledge to his audience, no matter what the topic is." Once a longtime colleague of the late children's television paragon at the public station WQED-TV, Mr. Moore has on several occasions referred to Mr. Berger as the "Mister Rogers of radio."

"He has had a tremendous amount of success and has a really large following, just like Mister Rogers did," Mr. Moore said. "Just like Mister Rogers, Larry is a kind soul. He doesn't draw attention to himself with any type of guns, violence or negativity, which is very uncommon in today's world."