

Prior Smith: Broadcasting north and south

Prior Smith has a nose not only for news, but for opportunity.

Let me explain. Prior launched and has been the producer of *Grapeline*, the daily sports commentary program starring Don Cherry and Brian Williams since its inception 26 years ago. Plus, for 33 years, he's been the host of *Canada Calling*, the daily newscasts for Canadians wintering in Florida.

You might say that this is his busy season. Prior, who spent 18 years in the newsroom at CFRB Toronto, began his broadcast career at CKLY Lindsay. From there, he spent time in Leamington, Cornwall and CJAD Montreal.

Relaxing in a Rogers Radio Toronto studio after a recent *Grapeline* recording session, Prior discussed that program's history.

"A guy named Gerry Patterson, who was Don Cherry's friend and agent, came to see me at St. Clair Productions (Standard Broadcasting's production company) in 1984. He said that he wanted to do a hockey show with Don Cherry. I chuckled and told him that the line of people who wanted to do that started down the hall and around the corner by the elevator. Gerry reached into his pocket, pulled out a cheque for \$100,000, passed it across the desk and said, 'When do you think we might be able to start?' Thinking quickly, I answered, 'How's a week from Monday?'"

Prior's concept for the program was to let Don do his thing and have a "top notch broadcaster" on the other side of the desk. Enter Brian Williams.

"Brian was doing sports at the local Toronto CBC-TV affiliate", Prior remembers, "I called him, he came in and he and Don just clicked immediately. And here we are 26 seasons later."

Prior says they record seven shows at a time. "We talk constantly throughout the week to lock down what we want to discuss then, at the session, Don and Brian record their segments and when necessary, [Rogers Radio Toronto producer] Stan [Matecki] and I edit their comments down to the four minutes that we need."

Prior's other winter project, *Canada Calling*, has been around for more than half a century with three separate hosts. Leaning back in his swivel chair, Prior recalls that program's origins.

"Dave Price was the co-host of a CBC radio network show called *Toast and Jamboree* and he'd been in Florida in 1948 covering the Toronto Maple Leafs baseball team. He was sitting on the beach with a bunch of his buddies and they couldn't find the score of the previous night's Stanley Cup hockey game.

"One of his pals said, 'Dave you're in the radio business, this area's crawling with Canadians, put a show on down here.' The light bulb went on and in January of 1954, the first *Canada Calling* was broadcast. I'm the third host. Dave did it until 1975, I believe it was, but by then he was



into his mid 70s and in ill health, so he sold the network to [broadcaster and politician] Finlay MacDonald.

"I'd heard it near the end of the Dave Price era and thought it needed an updating, so I went into competition and within a year my network was twice the size of theirs. Within a couple of years, *Canada Calling* had faded away."

Prior launched his service as *The Canadian News with Prior Smith*, but everyone kept referring to it as *Canada Calling*, so he researched the title, found the trademark had lapsed and eventually adapted it as his program's name. Currently there's a network of 15 stations and each newscast is five-and-a-half minutes long.

Even in today's computer age, Prior says: "You get beyond the border more than 100 miles and it's as if Canada doesn't exist. I don't give hockey scores because you can get those on ESPN or any cable sports channel, just all the news from Canada. I've been on the same stations, at the same time, for over 30 years, which, to me, is incredible."

Incredible is also the word that could be applied to Prior Smith's 44-year broadcast journey. He's one of our industry's unsung heroes, and if you don't believe me just ask Don Cherry, Brian Williams or any of the millions of Canadians who winter in Florida.

Doug Thompson, who'd really like to work on his Florida tan right about now, can be reached at doug.t@rogers.com.

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