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by Larry A. Quinn



(Photo by Eric Hylden, Grand Forks Herald)

MIKE HERGERT IS RETIRING – The first person to sit behind the Red River Farm Network (RRFN) microphone is retiring. **Mike Hergert** (RRFN, Grand Forks, ND) is an NAFB Hall of Fame (2015) broadcaster who co-founded the company and has been its guiding force over the past 21-plus years. RRFN has a national reputation because of Mike's commitment to his farm audience. After 46 years in farm broadcasting, Mike made the transition to retirement August 15. He will still help the RRFN crew on certain projects, like the *Big Iron Farm Show*, September 12-14. Mike is signing off after more than 30 years covering agriculture in the Red River Valley. He was chosen as NAFB Farm Broadcaster of the Year in 2007, and elected to serve as NAFB President in 2001. What are his plans for retirement? Mike said, "I plan to do volunteer work and hope to help people who haven't been as lucky as I have." His guiding principle is "Be honest and treat people the way I want to be treated." About Mike, Don Wick said, "Mike's professionalism, integrity and commitment to agriculture will remain a guiding force for the RRFN team. I have been proud to share the studio with him for the last 15 years."

(We are grateful to **April Baumgarten**, business writer, **Eric Hylden**, photographer, and the *Grand Forks Herald* for helping us tell the story of Mike's career.)



Mike Hergert has lived by one golden rule when it comes to radio: Be accurate and treat others the way you want to be treated. "You only get one chance to get it on the air right," he said. "There is no excuse for not getting it right." When he started the *Red River Farm Network* more than 20 years ago, he and his colleagues had as their motto: Reporting agriculture's business. "We really focus on business, what we call pocketbook issues," he said. "We try to report the important stories that we think will affect the pocketbooks of farmers." That dedication to farmers has made RRFN one of the most widely listened to agribusiness networks in North Dakota and Minnesota. Airing on 20 radio stations from Bismarck, ND, to Roseau, MN, and into west central Minnesota, Mike has led the network to regional recognition. The co-founder is signing off after more than four decades in the radio industry, with colleagues calling him one of the most dedicated and trusted voices in agriculture. As a child, Hergert wanted to be a sports

broadcaster. He would shoot hoops when he was younger, doing his own play-by-play. His 46-year career began in 1970 when he joined KFIL (Preston, MN) as a sports broadcaster. He later switched to reporting on agriculture and would go on to work for other media outlets, including KNOX (Grand Forks, ND). When Hergert and retired Farm Network co-founder **John Vasichek** were working at KKXL, they talked of forming a radio station dedicated to agribusiness reporting. Most networks did quick segments on agriculture business—perhaps two or three minutes recapping markets or reading a short farming story. The pair wanted a network that would feature stories that affected the bottom line of farmers' budgets. In launching RRFN in 1995, they formulated the idea of having two half-hour shows talking about agribusiness and offering the service to other radio networks to set them apart. "That half-hour show showed our commitment," Hergert

said. The two thought they would be lucky if they could get six radio stations to sign on. Before they knew it, they had a dozen, with farmers signing a petition to get the program on KZZY (Devils Lake, ND). Vasichek and Hergert knew that the audience—farmers and agribusinesses—was small



compared with a typical radio station, but they knew the impact was great in the Red River Valley. Hergert attributed Vasichek's success in advertising the network to potential radio stations for the business' growth, but Vasichek said Hergert's dedication, hard work and unbiased reporting are what made him a household name in the radio industry. "He never grandstands, he is just there to give you the story," Vasichek said. "Mike is the example that everyone aspires to be." Hergert isn't completely exiting the radio scene. He plans to help RRFN cover the *Big Iron Farm Show* in West Fargo, and possibly other events. He wants to spend his retirement traveling, volunteering, getting to know his grandchildren and being more involved in the Red River Runners Club in Grand Forks—he is an avid runner. "If there is any time left, I'd like to figure out my second career," he said with a smile. "I don't know (what that is) yet." Fellow broadcaster **Don Wick**, who is taking over as owner and president of the network, said Hergert and Vasichek took on a big task going out on their own and building up the network from scratch, but they focused on agriculture's economic impacts. That, along with Hergert's dedication and pursuit of accuracy, is why the network is the top-rated farm radio entity in the region, Wick said. "The integrity he has is unmatched. There is a lot to be said for what he has built here." Mike has mixed emotions about retiring. After all, RRFN has been a large part of his life. "It's hard to let go," he said. "It's kind of like my child." The work has been fast-paced, but he has met some tremendous people. He wants to thank his three core customers: the radio stations, advertisers and the farmers who listened to him. "We have been very fortunate to find local radio stations who believed in us," he said. "We've been blessed."



BALANCING FARM BROADCASTING WITH PARENTING AND EXERCISE –

“Balancing our demanding farm broadcasting jobs and schedules can be tricky when it comes to parenting and finding time for actual hobbies,” said **Lorrie Boyer** (KSIR, Fort Morgan, CO). In addition to running a morning show and producing ag newscasts and market reports daily, Lorrie works hard to find balance. Although early morning hours usually allow her to be home in the afternoons to see her sons, now ages 14 and 18, she does not get to see them in the morning. Even though they are older now, that was not the case when she first started radio. “They were not even born when I started in radio,” she says. “It has not been easy to be a farm broadcaster running a morning show with kiddos, especially when one of them does not feel good. Balance is achieved from coming in extra early to record morning news or working

late to get ahead for the next day because they might have a game or a guitar lesson, or I may need to take them to an appointment.” In addition to parenting, Lorrie is an avid CrossFitter. She finds that CrossFit helps her to balance her commitments because it helps alleviate stress and allows her some “me-time.”

CrossFit has a lot of close ties to agriculture. It enables her not only to talk about her job to curious gym mates, but she and fellow CrossFitters are focused on eating healthy, locally grown foods and meats. "Understanding nutrients, portion control and how food is produced allows me to dispel myths about farming practices and talk about local farmers." She adds, "It allows me to explain why milk costs what it does and since several don't work directly in the ag industry, I talk about how agriculture is the backbone of the community. I answer a lot of questions about radio and farming – what better way to promote my profession and the ag industry than direct engagement."



At the same time, Lorrie is balancing broadcasting, parenting and exercise, she is serving as NAFB's 2017 Vice President.





KEEPING A HERITAGE STATION RELEVANT TO A NEW GENERATION – George Bower took over program duties at Northwest Iowa’s legendary KICD-AM 10 years ago as the station commemorated 65 years on the air. His job was to keep a heritage station relevant to a new generation. Last year, he transitioned to the station’s respected farm department and considers his mission to be the same. George grew up on the family farm near Osage, IA, and started in radio at age 16 for KSMN. His 32-year career is neatly divided into decades. Ten years in news, ten years hosting a “morning zoo”, ten years as Program Director and Morning show host at News/Talk KICD, and, as of last summer, the station’s Farm Director. He feels the skills he picked up as a reporter and programmer prepared him for the “farm gig.” From day one, things were streamlined with shorter stories, shorter newscasts, shorter market reports, and shorter interviews. “A good newscast is three stories, a good interview is three questions, and I think you run the risk of tune-out if anything runs longer than three minutes,” Bower believes. “I once thought longer was better, but today I can edit a five-minute interview down to four minutes and think it’s pretty good, then come back the next day, find another minute to cut, and make it even better.” But shorter broadcasts don’t mean less content. KICD-AM actually added an additional farm newscast in the morning, and added *The KICD Midday Farm Show* at noon. The program runs half an hour, but is comprised of short, punchy segments. KICD (and sister FM Big Country 107.7) have not only bucked the trend of skeleton staffs by maintaining a farm director, but have two full-time farm reporters allowing them to leave the building and cover farm news in person. “We’re four hours from Des Moines. That’s a full-day just in travel,” Bower says, “I’m grateful our company (Saga Communications) and my General Manager **Dave Putnam** realize the value

of generating our own unique, local, farm information instead of ripping and reading wire copy.” Bower and Farm Reporter **Katie Johnson** have not only increased the volume of news, but increased KICD’s scope by putting more emphasis on poultry production – huge in the broadcast area – and the emerging dairy industry in Northwest Iowa. Some of the changes over the past year were purely cosmetic: Sounders and bump music on broadcasts that used to start and end cold, farm promos, and even the farm news itself has been rebranded as ag business. But above all, Bower puts emphasis on content, always looking for a good sound-bite or different angle. A recent wire story talked of the devastating drought in North Dakota. Bower tracked down a North Dakota Ag meteorologist who had a much less dire analysis and told KICD’s listeners, “I think everyone will be shocked at the good yields that might come out of North Dakota at harvest time.” Bower says the 1980s were an interesting time to enter the business. “Some of the guys who pioneered the industry in the 40s and 50s were still around, but things were changing. I’m kind of the last of that generation, but also the first of this generation, and I try to take the best from both.” Bower remembers early in his career suggesting the radio station start using a news sounder, and being reproached with a lecture on radio stations that promote “flash over substance.” Bower listened “doe-eyed” and then asked innocently, “But why can’t we have both?” Bower thanks his fellow farm broadcasters for their help in getting a running start. “My predecessors, **Dan Skelton** and **Troy Leininger**, got a lot of phone calls and texts the first few months, and my colleague, **Michelle Rook**, at WNAX got a lot of market questions for a while.” Bower values the contacts he’s made through NAFB. “I can’t imagine doing this job without the resources and support given to me by NAFB. It is the most collegial group to which I’ve ever belonged. **Tom Brand** and his staff are always responsive to my needs.” He continued, “I was amazed at the supportive, collegial atmosphere right from the start— from the first *Washington Watch* I attended where **Ken Root** took me under his wing, to the commodity conventions where veterans like **Tom Cassidy** and **Ken Anderson** made sure I was getting to the right events, to former NAFB President **Brian Winnekins** making sure I was taking advantage of the professional support NAFB has to offer. **Ben Nuelle** and I have a great relationship even though we’re technically competitors.” He concludes, “Five years ago doing ag news wasn’t even on my radar, but now I feel it’s what I was put here to do. It’s really the most rewarding job I’ve ever had.” George’s wife teaches kindergarten, and they have three children.

George’s Checklist

George hit the ground running a year ago with a checklist for what he wanted to do:

1. Shorter segments and shorter stories
2. Less repetition
3. More original reporting
4. Add production elements like a news sounder and bump music
5. Rebrand “farm news” to “ag business” and
6. Make ag information relevant to the entire audience



NEW NAFB MEMBER – Anna Hastert is digital editor and reporter for Iowa Agribusiness Radio Network. Anna is a native of Harlan, IA, and she graduated from Northwest Missouri State University in May 2017, with a BS in multimedia journalism. She began her radio career as a Sunday news broadcaster at KSOM/KS957 (Atlantic, IA). While in college, she worked at the university’s radio station KZLX and their NPR affiliate KXCV/KRNW. Also, she also wrote for the school’s award-winning newspaper, *The Northwest Missourian*. In her spare time, Anna enjoys reading, running, traveling, and tending to her alpacas. **Why did she choose farm broadcasting?** “Agriculture has always been a part of my life. Growing up, I watched my dad raise 200 head of Simmental/Angus cattle and grow 1,000 combined acres of corn and soybeans. Later, I found myself raising a small herd of Simmental/Angus cattle and showing my ‘crop’ at the local,

county fair.” Anna continued, “Once I moved to college, I got out of the cattle business. However, the weekend before my sophomore year of college, my family accompanied me on a trip to Colorado Springs, CO, where I assumed ownership of twelve alpacas. To date, I have six alpacas.” Anna added, “I became interested in agricultural broadcasting in my junior year of high school. Earlier in the school year, I had signed up to compete in the Agricultural Broadcasting Career Development Event (CDE), through the Iowa FFA organization. The event required participants to present a five-minute broadcast as if they were a farm director or reporter for a radio station. Because of my participation, I learned how to choose news stories most relevant to the agriculture industry as well as how to read numbers from the Chicago Board of Trade.”



Anna Hastert interviews **Craig Hill**, president of the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation.



NAFB FOUNDATION GRANT RECIPIENT HANNAH

BORG – This summer, KRVN/Rural Radio Network (Lexington, NE) hosted **Hannah Borg** as farm broadcasting intern with the assistance of an NAFB Foundation Grant. Hannah is a junior at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln studying agricultural communications. She grew up on a diversified row crop farm with a feedlot. Also, Borg has shown horses for 10 years with the American Paint Horse Association in all-around events. Her favorite classes are Showmanship and Hunter Under Saddle. She is active with the Nebraska Agriculture Youth Council (NAYC). It is a program hosted by the Nebraska Department of Agriculture, which has a goal of promoting agriculture to Nebraska youth. It is achieved in part through two major events, one

being the Nebraska Agricultural Youth Institute, which is a weeklong program for high school juniors and seniors to discover the career opportunities within agriculture. Hannah assists in facilitating students that week. The second NAYC program is conducted through elementary classroom visits and farm tours. She serves as the urban youth outreach committee chair and is responsible for planning classroom visits, creating educational content and organizing farm tours.



Hannah Borg interviews **Steve Wallers**, UNL College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources Dean. He will be stepping into a new position as Director of the Center for Grassland Studies.

Also, Hannah has fully embraced communicating agriculture through new technologies. She co-runs *FastAg* through *AgGrad's Snapchat* account. They provide three top agriculture news stories and one fun fact to the followers every Thursday. *FastAg* receives around 2,500 views. Borg also assists in maintaining KRVN's *Twitter* account. Hannah held a previous internship in the communications department with **Nebraska Governor Pete Ricketts**. There she drafted letters and statements, monitored daily news coverage and created graphics for National Ag Week tours. At KRVN/Rural Radio Network, Borg was tasked with several duties. First, she read copy and performed interviews. She learned how to read markets and to give live updates by the end of her internship. Hannah assisted in social media management. She also produced and edited videos for the station. "I always knew I would be a 'voice' for agriculture, but I never imagined I would be using my own voice. The internship at KRVN taught me so many things, but I really learned how much farmers and rural America depend on farm broadcasters. Hannah concludes, "I want to thank everyone at KRVN/Rural Radio Network for welcoming me and teaching me all about being a farm broadcaster." At the end of July, Borg was named the recipient of the **NAFB George Logan Scholarship**. She looks forward to attending the annual convention in November. Her mentors at KRVN were **Joe Gangwish** and **Jesse Harding**. About Hannah, Jesse said, "It was very apparent that Hannah's passion for sharing the story of agriculture made her a great addition to our team. She wanted to learn everything about broadcasting. With her knowledge in new technologies, she brought that to her work and elevated aspects of our 'traditional' broadcasting."

NAFB FOUNDATION GRANT FOR CAITLIN OAKES – Chosen to receive an NAFB Foundation Grant, WKDZ (Cadiz, KY) hired **Caitlin Oakes** to serve as the intern for *the WKDZ Morning Ag Report* and the *Ag Edge* website this summer. Caitlin is studying agribusiness at Murray State University, with a minor in mass communications. As she prepared for her senior year, Caitlin spent the summer working as the intern of WKDZ-WHVO News and Farm Director **Alan Watts**. Caitlin spent her summer focusing on ways to enhance the *Morning Ag Report* and *AG Edge* website. She did



Caitlin Oakes with her mentor **Alan Watts** at WKDZ.

feature stories on local FFA chapters, the Trigg County Summer Farm Tour and other farm and agriculture events. Also, she produced numerous videos of events that she covered, and provided reports that aired during the *Morning Ag Report*. She is a member of the Murray State University FFA Chapter and serves as the communications officer for the Agribusiness Club. Caitlin was a member of the Todd FFA Chapter, too, where she served as an officer. Caitlin gained her love for agriculture and telling the ag story from her grandfather, who was an FFA officer. She has worked on his farm for most of her life and still spends time on the weekends helping. When asked what she gained from the internship, Caitlin said, "I now have a better idea of what is involved in the media industry." She adds, "There is more to the media industry than what I initially thought, with the use of video, audio, photos and social media." Alan said, "The internship has given Caitlin a chance to put her passion for agriculture to use for telling the agriculture story." He noted, "Caitlin is a very talented writer who is able to find a story in the people that make agriculture what it is." Watts was told by a fellow student and friend of Caitlin's that her internship has impacted her choice about the career path that she wants to pursue.

WE WANT YOUR NEWS – Send us your stories and photos for future newsletter issues. Contact me at larryaquinn@outlook.com or call me at **703-819-6532**. *Airing on the Side of Agriculture* is included in the blog section of NAFB.com. For an archive copy of any past issues, go to **Membership** and click on ***Airing on the Side of Agriculture***.