

Legends of Charlotte: Sis Kaplan on creating a radio powerhouse

Sis Kaplan grew up in a radio family, and she and her late husband, Stan, transformed Charlotte radio when they bought WAYS AM. Now 87, she reflects on media, service and leadership.

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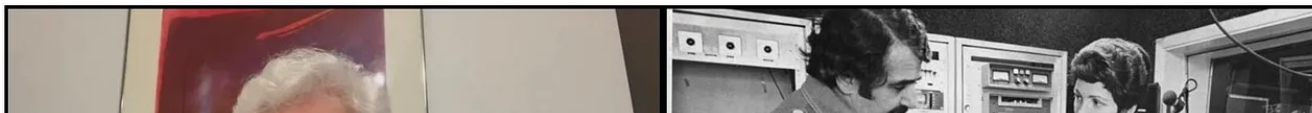


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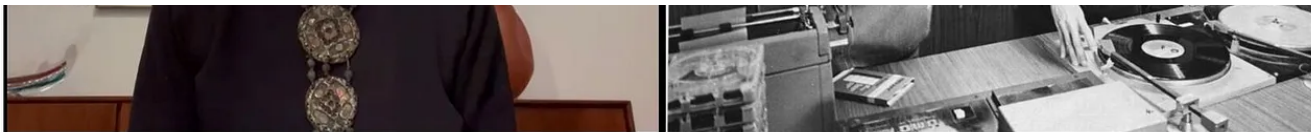


Editor's note: It's Legends of Charlotte Week at The Ledger, and we're bringing our members a series of fresh interviews with newsmakers from decades past who had profound impacts on Charlotte. They're trailblazers in politics and civic life, pioneering entrepreneurs and people who captured the attention of the community and forged unique contributions. We'll be back with our regular issues next week.

Q&A: Sis Kaplan, co-owner of the Big WAYS radio station from 1965-1986



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Sis Kaplan and her husband Stan arrived in Charlotte in 1965 after scouting radio stations to buy. They bought WAYS AM and invested in talent and creative ideas that captured the attention of Charlotteans. The photo on the right shows the couple in the studio in the mid-1960s. When Stan Kaplan died in 2001 at age 76, more than a dozen local radio stations went silent for one minute in tribute.

by Michael Solender

Sis Kaplan takes her measure of local media outlets by how well they connect and serve their community.

Kaplan should know, because for more than two decades, she and her late husband, Stan, owned and operated WAYS AM radio, one of the most popular radio stations in Charlotte and a cultural touchstone that helped shape the city's media landscape.

From 1965 to 1986, WAYS, known by its listeners as Big WAYS, delivered an innovative blend of local news, politics and Top 40 Rock & Roll through their 5,000-watt station to a Charlotte audience hungry for something different. (It broadcast at 610 AM, the same frequency that WFNZ occupies today.)

Along the way, the Kaplans grew the once-modest station into a regional powerhouse. With Stan's eye for promotion and sales, and Sis's considerable programming and production experience, Big WAYS became Charlotte's top-rated AM radio station, with the largest audience of any Top 40 radio station its size in the U.S.

The couple brought a strong stable of talent to Charlotte airwaves including the likes of shock jock Jay Thomas, Jack Gale, Morton Downey Jr., John Kilgo as news director and Robert "Murph in the Morning" Murphy. Current WCNC meteorologist Larry Sprinkle was their longtime production director. The Kaplans also owned two additional radio stations and published a weekly editorial newspaper.

Harriet "Sis" Kaplan, 87, grew up on a horse farm outside of Chicago and was exposed to the thrall of broadcast media early on. Her father, Les Atlass, founded three radio stations in Chicago, including fabled WBBM in 1924, when he was only 29. The station

went on to become CBS's second network affiliate and enjoyed national recognition.

After graduating from Rollins College in Winter Park, Fla., Kaplan began her broadcast career in Chicago with CBS as a production assistant. She was soon producing radio and television shows and honing her skills over nearly five years with the broadcast giant. She next joined the Chicago White Sox, where she worked for legendary owner Bill Veeck and produced both radio and television shows for the White Sox. Her work, of course, took her inside the White Sox press box, the first woman to ever occupy a seat there.

She married fellow broadcaster Stan Kaplan in 1964 and a year later moved to Charlotte to buy WAYS after the couple scouted stations across the country for purchase. Kaplan never looked back and embraced her new community with considerable volunteer and civic work despite a full-time career and raising a family. Her service work over the decades supported many social justice and community-based organizations, including the Council for Children's Rights, the Governor's Crime Commission, the Dilworth Neighborhood Association, Blumenthal Performing Arts, several civil rights initiatives, her synagogue, Temple Beth El, and many others.

The Kaplans sold WAYS and its sister station, WROQ (95.1 FM), in 1986 for \$13M; they'd bought WAYS in 1965 for \$550,000, and WROQ in 1972 for \$310,000, media widely reported at the time.

The Charlotte Ledger recently spoke with Kaplan about her life in radio, her civic role models and the state of radio today. Her responses are edited slightly for clarity and length.

Q: As a child, you knew Edward R. Murrow, tell us about that.

My dad joined CBS after selling the radio station he founded to the network. He came to know Murrow and became friends with him through this affiliation. Murrow would stay at our home in the country when he came to Chicago. I was very young but recall him as a likable and genuine person. Once when he came to visit, he joined a softball game the kids were playing. He was just a fantastic guy, and as I came to learn later, a remarkably talented journalist.

Q: What made you believe there was a market in Charlotte for the type of programming you wanted to offer?

I came to Charlotte to do due diligence before we bought the station. Charlotte was a very sleepy radio market. WBT had the lion's share of the audience and advertisers. One of the reasons we decided to have a news component was when we first came down, there was an election going on where [Frederick D. Alexander] the first Black man since Reconstruction was running for city council. WBT cut away in the middle of the election returns to broadcast a religious show. This made us think seriously about news. We knew there was a market for news, politics, issues and music that wasn't being featured here.

Q: How did you know you were connecting with an audience?

We had a great deal of audience participation on the station. We heard from our listeners loud and clear on a continual basis. We did research and were always involved in the community hearing from and interacting with the public. Our treasure hunts (promotions involving hidden prizes out in the community) caused so much of a stir the FCC intervened and outlawed them. Our ratings told us we were connecting.

Q: Can you share some of Charlotte's civic and community leaders you most admire?

Hugh McColl is at the top of the list. I admire him greatly for what he has done and continues to do. I consider him a friend and am fortunate to do so.

James Ferguson and Julius Chambers (both lawyers and civil rights champions; Chambers successfully argued before the U.S. Supreme Court in the Swann vs. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education case in 1971) come to mind for their civil rights work.

Ed Crutchfield (former CEO of First Union) was always involved and so supportive of the community.

Bill Lee (former CEO of Duke Power) was a great contributor. These people were all doers — they got things done. I.D. and Herman Blumenthal also fit into that category. (The Blumenthals were brothers who founded the prosperous Radiator Specialty Co. and

became philanthropists for whom the Blumenthal Performing Arts Center is named.)

Q: You speak about serving the community as an important aspect of being a broadcaster. Can you elaborate?

What one gives back in one's lifetime is how they impact and contribute to their community in work and in life. It is essentially their legacy. Public service was always an important part of how we saw our responsibility with our outlets.

Q: What are your observations on the state of local media today?

The number of radio and TV stations that continue to change hands is enormous. Where people get their news, information and entertainment has been a revolution since the time when we were broadcasting. There is less local news coverage of every sort.

With 24-hour national and international news availability, local news doesn't seem as prominent. Journalism as it used to be isn't necessarily what news is anymore. Anybody can have a blog or share information online, regardless of its validity.

Michael J. Solender is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in the New York Times, Smithsonian Magazine, American City Business Journals, Business North Carolina, the Charlotte Observer and elsewhere. He develops custom content and communications for businesses and organizations. On Twitter: @mjsolender.

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