



MIW LEGEND VALERIE BLACKBURN

BY EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
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nsuring a help wanted ad in the *Denver Post* 28 years ago landed Valerie Blackburn at the offices of Jacor's KOA and KOAQ-FM in Denver, where she took a pay cut to get her first job in radio. Blackburn was hired by the business manager to work in the stations' business department, but the business manager left soon after, and Blackburn convinced Lee Larson to give her a shot at the job.

"I told him to give me the opportunity, and, in a few months, if it doesn't work and you don't think I'm doing the job, no harm, no foul — I'm out," Blackburn recalls. "I said give me the opportunity, and I promise I'll work every minute of every day to make this successful." And that's what she did. Blackburn worked every minute of every day for Larson for more than a decade in Denver.

Larson says Blackburn had flawless financial-management skills and oversaw several key departments with a mix of positive people skills and focused execution. "But what set her apart from most financial people," he says, "was her strategic thinking and eagerness to help the stations achieve their goals. Valerie blends determination and competence with a little bit of Texas charm to make working with her a delight. It's no wonder that she has risen to station management and industry-wide leadership. She can do it all."

When someone is that successful in the radio business, word travels fast and far. Blackburn was recruited by Susquehanna and found herself, after 11 years in Denver, working in San Francisco for David Kennedy, one of the most respected operators in the country.

Kennedy tells *Radio Ink* that superlatives come easy when you're talking about Valerie Blackburn. "Intelligent, dedicated, focused, tireless, creative — and they're all true, they fit her to a T. But what really makes Valerie

special, and what's enhanced the lives of those of us who've had the chance to work with her, is that she is fundamentally such a wonderful human being, caring, thoughtful, warm, and funny. And the fact that she can blend those all-too-rare qualities with professionalism and a passion for radio that's second to none makes all of us the really lucky ones."

Blackburn would spend eight years working in San Francisco for Susquehanna before Cumulus purchased the company. At that point, she thought she was ready for a break in the action. She certainly wasn't planning on moving to a bigger city.

"I did not want to move to L.A.," she says. "It's just really hot here, and I've never been drawn to this huge city. CBS called a couple of times and I said no. Lee Larson called and asked me what was going on. I said I had some things in the fire, but I really wanted to take a break. I told him CBS called to talk about L.A., and this man, who's been so nice to me, was like, 'Who the hell do you think you are, telling CBS no?'

"It totally slapped me upside the head and I was like, 'OK, OK.' So I called CBS and said, 'If you're still interested, I don't want to move to L.A., but I'll come in and clean it up and somebody else can run it. They said, 'Not a problem as long as you move here.' I was brought in as market controller for the seven CBS stations. I got here, and, oh, look, here I am."

In all, including a term as GM of KFWB, Blackburn would spend eight years with CBS in L.A.

Now, after 28 years working in three cities, Blackburn is ready to move around a bit more. She's started her own company, VKB Consulting. If you need an experienced, successful, smart, and dedicated manager to help your station or cluster through a transition, Valerie Blackburn could be the

person you're looking for. And in 2014, she is the unanimous choice of the *Radio Ink* editorial staff for MIW Legend.

RI: Why have you enjoyed doing this job for as many years as you have?

I'm as passionate today about radio as I was when I first got into the business 28 years ago. I love radio. I love what we do. I love that we are local. I was a listener before I worked in this industry; I was a fan. When I got to meet Ron Chapman a couple of years ago at the NAB, huge highlight, huge. I listened to him forever. I love what we do, I got in, and I got addicted.

I like the fact that we are in charge of our own content. That we are agile. That we are able to move quickly. I was a music major in college, and so I thrive on music. It's woven into the very fabric of my life. I'm a news junkie. I'm a sports gal. If something happens,



"Valerie Blackburn is a powerhouse. Straightforward. Smart. Fun. Directed. Caring. A team-builder, a leader, and, I am so happy to say, a friend. This honor is richly deserved for the legend she is and is still becoming."

RUTH PRESSLAFF
Presslaff Interactive

"Whether it was as CFO, station GM, or national chair for AWM, Valerie Blackburn has always risen to the top. She cannot help but lead with her natural talents, wonderful, giving heart, and her desire to make a difference. She leads by example, hard work, and always-positive example. She has earned and lived her legacy of giving back. I'm wishing her much continued success with VKB Media Consultants. Bravo, Valerie!"

KAY OLIN
Olin and Associates

if there's a slight tremor here, our newsroom says, 'OK, what's going on?' I work in the newsroom on election nights. If nothing else, I'm happy to go get coffee, to print things for people, to run errands. I love the energy and the vitality. I'm just so addicted.

RI: How have you been so successful for so long in the number two market in the country?

I don't have a stereotypical "finance personality." I realize it's all about the numbers and the bottom line, but I'm people-driven. I'm honest – I'm direct, perhaps that's a better way to say it. What you see is what you get. I can be a very noisy person and not everybody likes that, but my staffs, over the years, the people that I work with, they know that in my heart I care about them and what happens to them. It could be helping them advance within the company, or coaching them out into something more suitable to them.

I think I've been successful in that the program directors, the sales managers, they know that I'm here for their best interests. I'm not here to say no. I'm here to say, "Yes, if we do it this way," or, "Let's take a look at it this way." They know that I want the best for the product, and in some ways I find it surprising that not everybody can be successful at this. It's an innate ability to care about what I do – plus, I work very hard.

RI: What has been your biggest challenge over the years?

Probably that the area of finance is not always seen as being as important as sales



or programming. As far as I'm concerned, everything runs through finance. If the money is not there, then you can't do the research. If the finances aren't there, you have to make very difficult decisions with expenses. So that's been a challenge.

But how many up-and-down cycles have we had over the past three decades that I've been in the business? There have been some very low times for our industry. Managing through those down cycles has been a challenge.

RI: What do you consider your biggest successes over the years?

The relationships I've developed and maintained over my career, whether it be from people who mentored me or those I've had the great fortune to bring along. It's the relationships. When I was in Denver with Jacor, that was their biggest market. In San Francisco with Susquehanna, that was their biggest market. In L.A. with CBS. I'm very proud that I've gotten to work with some of the best companies in their biggest markets.

RI: Who has helped you the most along the way, and how?

Lee Larson and David Kennedy are two of the people I've worked with who have given me major opportunities and encouragement. At CBS, it's Anton Guitano, Stacey Benson, and Dan Mason who allowed me to make changes and suggestions, and that was huge.

You know the other group that is always there is the MIWs. Erica Farber, Kay Olin, Ruth Presslaff, Heidi Raphael, and Diane Sutter. These women are totally supportive of one another and know that if one succeeds, we all succeed. There's such genuine respect, trust, and pure affection for these women because they are talented and smart and funny. Without a doubt, it's just a great posse to be a part of.

RI: What would you like to see radio improve on over the next 10 years?

Obviously, we're still content-driven. I don't care what device you get it on, the phone or the computer or the car or whatever, it's still content. I think we could do a lot better job with advertising. Doing more, creating more selling, and fresh advertising.

You know, I think TV has done a better job with that.

Everybody fast-forwards through commercials, but now they've got shows that talk about the best commercials, and there are commercials you watch over and over because they are little stories that once again you're called to listen to. I think radio could do a better job, we could improve there.

RI: What's it going to take for radio to get over this flat-revenue hump?

Well, the good news is that comps are back to a better place. I don't see massive growth year-over-year. What I do see, though, is that this will continue to be a very viable industry. Our margins are always going to be terrific. We have great margins. We bring a lot of money to the bottom line. I wouldn't want to continue in this industry or move forward if I didn't think that there was still a lot of room for growth.



KFWB's Paul Lowe, Valerie Blackburn, and KFWB's Maggie McKay and Joe Guimond.



"If you need to get something done, the best person to ask at CBS Radio Los Angeles is Valerie Blackburn. Valerie is a great administrator; she takes care of business. Valerie is also a very fun person. When I received my star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, she was so supportive. Valerie even put on one of my Shotgun Tom Kelly commemorative ranger hats. I'm so happy that she was there to help me celebrate my big day on Hollywood Boulevard."

SHOTGUN TOM KELLY



they do a valid search. That would be me. I can come in, keep steering the ship, and move the company forward while they look for a long-term solution. VP for rent.

RI: You have a chance to give radio people, women especially, some advice on advancing and staying with it, and what they need to do to become a manager. What would you say to them?

You've got to work hard. But know you're not alone. Make sure you're reaching out to other people for support and for advice and for input. You know, some of the jobs I've gotten over the years were because I asked. Because I saw it on someone's desk and I asked, "Do you mind if I worked on this? Do you mind if I do this?"

If the answer is no, the answer is no. But what if it's yes? It's something new that you get to do. But people generally are not going to come to you – you've got to go to them. You've got to be noisy. You've got to make noise.

RI: Tell us about your new company, VKB Consulting.

I want to focus on what I enjoy most and get the most satisfaction from. That's problem-solving, project management, and strategic planning. Those are the things that feed

me. I want to be more project-based. I see a need for interim positions where there might be a hole somewhere, a market manager/GM role or a finance role that for whatever reason is open at the moment. Stations really can't leave that position open while

