

6ABC to mark 70 years of dominating news ratings

By **DEBORAH MCGUIRE**
Special to the Star and Wave

PHILADELPHIA — And the big story is ... step into any home in Cape May, Lower Township or anywhere else throughout the Delaware Valley and if the television's on, odds are it's tuned to Channel 6.

Now called 6ABC, the iconic station that had its roots in two Philadelphia department stores this week marks the 70th anniversary of the station's first day of televising.

According to Robert Clipp in a 1964 article for the Broadcast Pioneers, the media powerhouse's genesis was St. Patrick's Day 1922 in the Strawbridge and Clothier's store when it started broadcasting on the radio at WFI. A year later, wrote Clipp, another Philadelphia department store, Lit Brothers, began a similar broadcast using the call letters WLIT.

"The 'rug department' broadcasting operations prospered to the point where, in 1935, the two stores merged the two stations, chose WFIL for the call letters, and formed a corporation," Clipp wrote.

So successful was the merger that in the fall of 1937, WFIL was moved from the stores into a new headquarters high atop the Widener Building.

Purchased in 1945 by Philadelphia Inquirer publisher Walter Annenberg, owner of Triangle Publications, the idea of expanding the radio station to include the relatively new medium called television was broached.

The Broadcast Pioneer archive states: "One day, Annenberg called his advisers into a room to discuss the possibility of starting a television station. All were opposed except for Walter. He won. For the cost of a 3-cent stamp, he filed for the construction permit."

A new building was designed in 1946 which was the first one in the world built specifically for telecasting operations at 46th and Market streets. "And on Sept. 13, 1947, WFIL-TV took to the airwaves," said Gerry Wilkinson, chief executive officer of Broadcast Pioneers. It was the 13th station on the air in the United States.

Moving into its new digs in early 1948, the station was instrumental in bringing the two 1948 political conventions to the city. With San Francisco and Philadelphia both vying to be the place where the next president would receive the nomination of his party, the advantage of having WFIL to televise the conventions for the first time in history was an important factor in the decision to bring both Harry Truman and the Democrats along with Thomas Dewey and the Republicans to the City of Brotherly Love.

Over the course of seven decades, the television giant has provided local audiences with Delaware Valley-centric programming and provided it with local personalities such as children's show hosts Sally Starr, Traynor "Chief" Half-town, Howard "Happy the Clown" Jones, W. Carter "Capt. Noah" Merbreier, Patricia "Mrs. Noah" Mer-

breier and Bill "Wee Willie" Webber. Music programs were hosted by Al Alberts, Bob Horn, Dick Clark and Larry Ferarri, to name just a few. Program hosts and announcers included Wally Kennedy, Paul Norton and Phil "Uncle Philsy" Sheridan. These are just a few of the long list of names associated with the call letters WFIL and WPVI.

Outgrowing its facility, a new, advanced broadcast building was constructed in 1963 at 4100 City Ave., where the station still resides. As part of a Federal Communications Commission ruling that did not allow owners to have newspapers and broadcast facilities in the same market, Annenberg sold WFIL to Capital Cities Communications in 1971, when the station call letters were changed to WPVI.

A stronghold of WFIL/WPVI has been its news coverage. Since the first day it broadcasted in 1947, the station has provided locals with up-to-the-moment news of the tri-state area and the world. Generations have sat down and learned their news by switching the channel to 6.

In 1970, the news format was changed and Action News was born. The new format increased the number of news stories in a half-hour, thereby increasing coverage. And, according to Mike Monsell, creative services director for 6ABC, the change of format has resulted in the station leading the news ratings for almost four decades.

"It's really humbling to work at a place that's been



No. 1 for seemingly forever. Depending on which day, month, demo you look at, you might see a slip up here or there. But across the board, we win the ratings battle more than 90 percent of the time. That's really unheard of in a major TV market."

"We were able to cover events that others didn't cover," explained Marc Howard, retired Action News anchor. "We were able to provide more local news."

Howard was part of the Action News team from 1977 to 2002, and anchored the 5 p.m. news broadcast with the legendary Lisa Thomas Laury. He noted that the pair anchored together for 19 years.

Longevity seems to have built a special relationship between Action News and its viewers. Changes to the news team do not come frequently. By entering people's homes each day for many years and providing local news, the Action News team became unofficial members of the public's families.

"Generally that's the

six months after O'Brien's death, people would stop him and express their condolences.

"It was such a feeling that we were family," Howard said. "I was quite moved by it. It was a striking indication of how people felt about Action News."

With the station sitting on the brink of its eighth decade, the future is bright, Monsell said.

"Let's be honest. Each year less and less of our target audience have a connection with the Golden Age of television. We can't earn their loyalty because we have history. We've got to find new and unique touch points to them."

"Channel 6, more than most stations in the country, became the voice of the community," Howard said. "They did it through years of continuous coverage. They became the family station."

Commission wants city to bag plastic

By **RACHEL SHUBIN**
Special to the Star and Wave

CAPE MAY — The Cape May Environmental Commission is in the early stages of developing a plan to reduce the use of nonbiodegradable plastic bags in the city, saying plastic bags often end up in the ocean and have detrimental effects on marine life.

The goal of the commission is to get the local businesses that are using plastic bags to switch over to reusable bags. The commission is considering purchasing reusable non-woven polypropylene bags featuring its logo and a message reminding users to "go green."

Cape May merchants who are interested in participating with the commission are able to get their logo on the opposite side of the bag.

Eveyn Lovitz, chairwoman of the Environmental Commission, said the idea evolved in January.

"There was a small group of us here who came together and we decided we would like to eliminate all plastic bags," Lovitz said. "We all agreed that it would be a good project."

An email letter from the Chamber of Commerce was sent to local businesses asking them if they would be interested in working with the commission on this project. The letter asked for input and any ideas on the topic. Eliminating the amount of plastic debris in the ocean is the overarching goal.

"We talked about how other places have begun using reusable bags, like California. They charge you for

using plastic bags," Lovitz said. "Grocery stores like Whole Foods give money back to charity if you bring reusable bags."

The commission plans to take the winter to gather consensus and decide how it will move forward. Much of the planning will incorporate stores that join in, ultimately affecting the cost of the bags.

"We would like to give them out to the many realtors' offices," Lovitz said. "The realtors hand out information in small bags, so if they work with us we could provide bigger reusable bags."

The commission would also like to give the reusable bags to the beach tag checkers who can in turn give them out and ask that people reuse them. Providing reusable bags to beachgoers is an active way to try to reduce the amount of plastic bags that people leave behind on the beach, the commission said.

The incentive for local businesses is saving the

environment and having shoppers with bags as walking advertisements.

"Someone walking down the mall with the reusable shopping bag sporting the store's logo is good advertising," Lovitz said.

Feedback from the local merchants has been positive.

"One store said once they finish their plastic bags they will go to reusable bags, but with their own logo," Lovitz said. "That's perfectly OK.

Anyone who chooses to provide reusable bags is great."

The Environmental Commission has not contacted Acme but the grocery store is on its radar. Acme does sell reusable bags near registers.

The polypropylene reusable bags are made from a synthetic plastic, making them durable and highly ecological.

The Environmental Commission hopes to implement these bags for summer 2018.

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