A History of WNCU, 90.7 FM

Since its debut in August 1995, WNCU, 90.7 FM, licensed to North Carolina Central University, has consistently fulfilled its mission to provide quality culturally appropriate, diverse programming to public radio listeners in the Triangle area. The format of this listener-supported public radio station entertains the jazz aficionado, educates the novice jazz listener, and disseminates news and information relative to the community-at-large.

WNCU was the vision of Donald Baker, the first general manager of this public radio station. Even as a student at North Carolina Central University (NCCU) years ago, Baker suggested the idea to university administrators.

In 1986, North Carolina Central University’s new Chancellor, Dr. Tyronza Richmond, also envisioned a radio station on the campus. Their interest and motivation to start a campus radio station was shared by NCCU professor Dr. Donell Lewis and English Department Chair, Dr. Patsy Perry. They all collaborated and subsequently applied for a Title III grant and submitted a Federal Communications Commission (FCC) application requesting a broadcast facility construction permit on behalf of the University.

Donald Baker was hired to develop the new radio station, but the application process hit a snag not long after his coming on board. In hopes of moving the application forward, Baker and Lewis solicited the help of a North Carolina Congressional delegation, including The Honorable Senator Terry Sanford, Representative David Price, Representative Mel Watt, and Representative Eva Clayton, but they all reported that no FM frequencies were available at the time. In July 1990, it appeared that NCCU was going to be thwarted in its efforts to gain access to the airwaves. Since none of the distinguished congresspeople were able to obtain a frequency from the FCC, Dr. Lewis and Mr. Baker visited the Senior Senator from North Carolina, The Honorable Jesse Helms. After explaining the University’s dilemma to the Senator, and after assuring him that the WCPE signal in Wake Forrest, NC. could be protected from interference from the WNCU signal, he rallied to the cause. First, he secured Lewis and Baker an audience with the Chairman of the FCC; secondly, he argued NCCU’s case before the FCC; and finally he convinced the United States Navy to allow the university to salvage the call letters (WNCU) of a decommissioned US Navy carrier. With Senator Helms’ assistance, the reality of a radio station, a more than twenty-year dream for the University, was finally coming to fruition. Within six weeks of their first contact with Senator Helms, Chancellor Richmond was contacted and informed that barring any obstacles or challenges to the license, the University would be allowed to commence broadcasting on October 1, 1991.

Suddenly, out of the blue the application was challenged! A religious organization from Ocala, Florida, had applied for the same frequency and the entire process ground to a halt for two more years.

But when new Chancellor Julius Chambers took office in January 1993, the process of getting WNCU back on track was reinvigorated and began to gain traction. The university funded the initial start-up, purchased equipment, and began construction of the studio. By 1994, Triangle-area newspapers were informed that something exciting was about to emanate from NCCU. The excitement continued to build until, finally, the station tested its signal in July 1995.

WNCU continues to provide a culturally diverse programming lineup. In April 2001, new general manager Edith Thorpe came on board with goals that included self-sufficiency of the station, strengthening the station’s relationship with students enrolled in media courses at the University, and establishing strong relationships with the community it serves.

The WNCU professional staff has consisted of very talented and dedicated individuals who have included Lackisha Sykes, Business Manager/Assistant General Manager; B. H. Hudson, Music Director/Asst. Program Director; Uchenna Bulliner, Development Director; Jim Davis, Engineer; Kimberley Pierce Cartwright, News and Public Affairs Director; Kristy Caldwell, Office Manager; Lolethia Underdue; Aasim Inshirah, Public affairs producer; Ken Grady, Jazz host and newscaster; Chantal Winston, Webmaster; Judy Womack, Talk show host. In addition, WNCU has been fortunate to have had the following individuals on staff: Nicole Thompson, Larry Thomas, Bobby Allen, Truitt O’Neal, Chris Whitfield, Rony Camille, Phyllis Houston Washington, Sharon Winstead, Raechel Weaver, Eric White, Gerard Farrow, Tiphani Mallette, Theresa Whitley, Nchechi Ukgeweki, Guy Seaberg, Pamela Tolson, and Ivory Lawson.

The community volunteers at WNCU have been numerous and dedicated. They include members of our community who are loyal to the mission of public radio and some who have given more than a decade of their time to WNCU. They are Tracey Barley, Howard Burchette, James Davis, Lois Deloatch, Ed Fulbright, Walter ‘Country Boy’ Hatcher, Irv Joyner, Patricia Murray, Bouna Ndiaye, Hanif Omar, Carolyn Ryals, Steve Satterfield, Steve Taxman, Phillip Bro Rabb Bell III, Mike
Soloman, Jay Bell, Taz Blackley, Jonas Brown, Matthew ‘Mattio’ Furtick, Soleir Schaefer Gordon, Mark Lee, Jon Scott Williams, Mike Wilson, Cayenne Pepper, Fran Scarver, Claudia Ruiz, Eduardo Perez, Brianna Hunt, Natalie Bullock Brown, Ed Clark, Kerra Burton.

As a member of the African American Public Radio Consortium, *The Tavis Smiley Show* was conceptualized and developed along with Loretta Rucker, public radio consultant, and other public radio station general managers, including Edith Thorpe. Currently, WNCU airs the NPR collaborative programs, *News and Notes* and *Tell Me More*, in addition to *The Tavis Smiley Show*, currently distributed by PRI.

Currently, WNCU operates under the leadership of the new acting general manager, Lackisha Sykes. She has been a part of the WNCU staff since July 2006. Sykes’ goals are to continue the efforts of ensuring that the station is self sufficient, to enhance the intellectual climate of the university by restructuring the training programs offered to students interested in radio broadcast, and to continue to cultivate our relationships with the university and the local community.

As WNCU observes thirteen years of commercial free broadcasting, the Triangle area celebrates the station’s rich programming and diversity in music, news and information. WNCU is committed to serving the public’s interest by providing a diverse cultural music line-up, local news and public affairs programs, and by fostering relationships with local agencies and organizations throughout Durham and surrounding counties.

Prepared by Ms. Edith Thorpe  
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