

Radio Activism

West Philly residents are starting a community station to wake up the neighborhood.

by Will Dean

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Illustration by Deanna Staffo

ON A BRIGHT AND CLEAR SATURDAY IN APRIL, ABOUT 10 ACTIVISTS, ARTISTS AND VOLUNTEERS GATHER IN FRONT of an old storefront at 52nd and Hazel. Just a few months ago the building was a single room littered with bits of wood, old carpets and other pieces of junk left over from previous inhabitants. Now three distinct rooms are taking shape, and all that clutters the floor are pieces of drywall, PVC pipes, nails, hammers and other construction supplies.

On one side, volunteers John McLaughlin and William Baptist III are putting up walls for the bathroom. Baptist, a video editor with a youthful face and a steady demeanor, stands on a ladder hammering nails as McLaughlin holds the drywall. "This is the first time I've ever done this," says McLaughlin. Across the room, Bryan Welton, a nonprofit development professional with punkish glasses and a shaved head, cuts PVC for a ventilation pipe.

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Outside, a middle-aged man sporting shorts and a ponytail stands by a boombox, talking to passers-by. Andrew Brazington, who works as director of entrepreneurial and environmental projects for Streetz to Creeks LLC by day, enjoys holding court with the curious.

"What are you doing?" they ask.

"We're building you a radio station," he replies.

People walking by with groceries and other goods from the bustling 52nd Street thoroughfare are surprised to learn that a radio station is popping up here.



STATION AGENTS: WPEB volunteers — L-R front row: William Baptist III, Andrew Brazington, Shy Oaks; back row: Mbali Umoja, Delcina Wilson, Louis Massiah, Pete Tridish and Bryan Welton — stand outside of the station they helped build.

Jessica Kourkounis

"This is y'all's station," says Mbali Umoja, the start-up coordinator for the upstart station (call letters WPEB). She explains that WPEB is a new kind of media outlet for Philadelphia: a community radio station that anyone can get involved in.

A group of men cleaning out a nearby house take a break to check it out.

James Thomas, who lives on the 5100 block of Cedar Avenue, gets excited once he hears the details. He sees the station as a chance to connect with the youth of his community. He considers hosting a show. "We can talk more about what's going on in the community and give us insight into how we can deal with the young people coming up," says Thomas, who has three kids of his own.

He hopes WPEB can become a forum to address the violence in the area, too. There were five murders within a few blocks of 52nd and Hazel in 2007. "I think it would be good to talk about how to make the community safer and how we can put our community back together."

Back inside, everyone is busy. Umoja makes reminder phone calls to people who promised to submit applications for shows. Delcina Wilson, a visual artist and the operator of the art project Urban Oasis, goes over the applications already received.

The station is set to launch in less than a month, and there's still a lot to do.

The most important room, the studio, is progressing nicely thanks to the skills of volunteer contractor Shy Oaks. A tall, skinny and unsurprisingly quiet man, Oaks has worked for the past two months to essentially build a station from nothing. This location presents special problems: The station is right on the sidewalk, and with all of the buses, cars and people going by, noise is an issue.

"We decided to build a box within a box," says Oaks, gesturing at the walls of the studio, which are distinct from those of the building itself. They also hung up two layers of sheet rock, instead of one, and isolated the joints using an elastic caulk to block out air and dampen the sound-transferring capability of rigid objects. The walls need to be sanded and plastered, but with a little imagination one can see where the mixers, turntables and mics might go.

Enthusiasm, though, is easy to find.

"This is an extremely positive endeavor," says Wilson. "I see this as a venue for voices that are often marginalized or drowned out."

After today, walls are up, pipes are connected and the day when Philly's radio landscape will change edges closer.

ON SAT., MAY 17, THE NONCOMMERCIAL EDUCATIONAL FM STATION WPEB (88.1) — WHICH SHUT DOWN IN 2005 after legal allegations of interference from Channel 6 — will relaunch as a community-based station to give West Philadelphians a voice on the air. The new WPEB will feature community news, public affairs, music and talk, all recorded and produced by volunteer residents. They'll kick it all off that day with a big party at the station (541B S. 52nd St.) with entertainment and giveaways, plus live broadcasting from noon to 6 p.m. It is a rare moment for community media, and Philadelphia media in general, as it is next to impossible to start any kind of new FM station in a huge urban market like Philly, much less a nonprofit community one.

"It is very exciting," says Umoja. "Anything that can give West Philly a voice is amazing since our concerns are not exposed in mainstream media."

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WPEB is a joint project of the Media Mobilization Project (itself a part of the Philadelphia Independent Media Center, an activist news Web site at phillyimc.org), the Scribe Video Center (a nonprofit dedicated to community media) and the Prometheus Radio Project (an activist group that agitates for media freedom and helps set up community radio stations around the world).

Using a variety of fundraising sources, Scribe acquired the license of the defunct WPEB in 2006 and the groups began to plan the new station. They held public meetings to encourage residents to get involved, and Scribe has offered classes on radio production for volunteers eager to try their hands at a radio show.

For Prometheus, which grew out of West Philly's infamous pirate station Radio Mutiny, operating from November 1996 to June 1998, WPEB presented the unique chance to set up a legit station in Philadelphia. "I'm really excited about it," says Andy Gunn, Prometheus' technical adviser to the station. "We usually travel somewhere and have a barn raising for a station over a weekend, but since this is our backyard we've been taking extra time."

Community radio, because of its focus on the local issues and struggles of groups often forgotten by the mainstream, is also an effective tool for local activists to organize around their progressive, leftist politics. "This is an opportunity not just to preach your politics but work together to build an institution," says Jonathan David, a member of the IMC who helped set up WPEB's committees. "If you look at grassroots movements around the world, community radio is a medium left social movements have relied on a lot."



AIR APPARENT: Once the station is up and running — it goes live May 17 — its members will vote on a group of 15 managers to run things for a year.

Jessica Kourkounis

EVERYONE INVOLVED KNOWS WPEB IS AN ANOMALY. FOR ONE THING, STARTING A NEW STATION IN A PLACE LIKE Philly is very rare because the Federal Communications Commission [FCC] doesn't open new frequencies in major urban markets. The only way to acquire one is to buy it off an existing station.

Its commitment to the community also makes WPEB very unusual.

Community radio is actually a very *old* idea. It used to be everywhere in the United States. When the FCC was created in 1934, replacing the Federal Radio Commission, part of its mission was the idea that the airwaves exist as a public resource. Every station given a license was required to serve the public interest, and a section of the FM band, 88.1-91.9, was set aside for noncommercial educational stations.

Local stations across the country were also granted Class D (10-watt) community radio licenses.

That changed in 1978 when the FCC, at the behest of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, eliminated the Class D license (everywhere but Alaska), setting the minimum legal strength of a new station at 100 watts. Radio stations without the means to upgrade to that high wattage were suddenly illegal.

Things got even worse for local radio with the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996. A piece of sweeping legislation, the Telecommunications Act eliminated most ownership caps pertaining to the number of stations a company is allowed to own in any market, leading to large conglomerates buying and squeezing out locally owned and operated stations.

Now, Philadelphia radio is mostly owned by five companies: Clear Channel, CBS, Greater Media, Beasley Broadcasting Group and Radio One Broadcasting. Out of the 29 FM and AM stations based in Philadelphia (not counting ones that reach the city but are not based here), 23 are owned by those five companies.

For those who follow media issues, or find themselves flipping through the dial looking for something they haven't heard before, this homogenization of Philly's airwaves is no surprise. Over the last few decades, the majority of America's media outlets (radio, television and newspapers) have come to be owned by large, nationwide companies such as Clear Channel, which owns well over 1,000 stations nationwide.

Out of the few independent FM stations in Philly, three are run by large universities — Penn's WXPB, Drexel's WKDU and Temple's WRTI — and another is the local National Public Radio station WHYI. The only independent commercial FM station is B101, which is owned by WEAZ(FM) Radio Inc., a Bala Cynwyd company that owns no other stations.

The prospects for community radio have started to look better thanks mainly to the advocacy of groups like Prometheus. In 2000, the group won the right for low-power stations, ones below 100 watts, to apply for new licenses, but only outside of major urban markets. WPEB is a rare case indeed, a David in a land of FM Goliaths.

The way the station is run is also unusual: Decisions about specific issues, like programming and fundraising, are made by the members of committees that work on those problems. Once the station is up and running, the members will vote on a group of 15 managers to run things for a year. Membership is where the station really hopes to engage and motivate the community.

The membership program is similar to those at public radio stations (fees are on a sliding scale of \$5-\$50 per year), but with a very important difference. Instead of collecting branded mugs and bags, WPEB members are expected to actively participate in the workings of the station. Members can join one of the seven standing committees — outreach, programming, fundraising, finance, training, governance and planning — volunteer for the station, work on one of the shows or actively attend the monthly meetings. In fact, in order to vote on station elections, members must be active on a committee and attend twice-monthly meetings.

Through their direct connection to the community they intend to serve, WPEB hopes to make radio vital and interesting to people in Philly again. "[WPEB] will be community-run, community-funded and will present issues that are important to people in West Philly," says Umoja. "It'll be the only station like this in Philly."

WPEB IS CURRENTLY BROADCASTING OUT OF A 1-WATT TRANSMITTER ON TOP OF CALVARY CHURCH AT 47TH AND Baltimore, where Prometheus is based, with a signal radius of about one mile. Before the station goes live, random dial-surfers who come across 88.1 will hear a repeating playlist of songs and the occasional station ID. This is only a placeholder. With the new station on 52nd Street, WPEB will step out as a living, breathing expression of the people who created it — and anyone else who wants to get involved.

Programming is the heart of any radio station, and that is where the station's progressive, community message will take shape. Anyone in West Philly can apply for a spot (the applications are available online at scribe.org/about/wpeb). No experience is required, as Scribe and Prometheus will host training sessions for wannabe radio stars. The application is then reviewed by the volunteer programming committee.

Many shows have already applied for spots and pre-recorded shows and demos.

One such show is *On Blast*, a production of the Philadelphia Student Union (PSU, phillystudentunion.org), an activist group of Philly high school students focused on making the school system equitable. From its title (a term that means to put someone on notice) to subject matter, the show represents the youth of Philly who conceived, wrote, recorded and produced it. It's a rare opportunity for young people to voice their opinions and get taken seriously for it.

"A lot of times people don't take us seriously as organizers because we're younger," says Daniel Jones, co-host of the show and sophomore at Julia R. Masterman High School in Fairmount. "People take you a lot more seriously if you put a microphone in their face."

The first episode, which is already recorded and runs 27 minutes, includes a segment on teacher quality. It features interviews with teachers and students about the disparity of skilled teachers and resources between schools in higher- and lower-income sections of the city.

"We don't have enough qualified teachers, a lot of them move to get better paying jobs," says Candace Carter, co-host and junior at William L. Sayre High School in West Philly. PSU blames this on the lack of resources and incentives to attract qualified and experienced teachers to schools in disadvantaged areas. "A lot of teachers don't have what they need to teach and we don't have what we need to learn," says the aspiring journalist.

Another section, called "Song Breakdown," focuses on decoding messages in popular music. For the first show they looked at the hip-hop hit "Low" by Flo Rida, which the students found to be full of misogynistic messages. "He's describing all these things, like liquors and cars, which are really expensive, and that these are things that every man needs to be successful and powerful," says Jones. "Then he puts women on that list and that gives the idea that women are property and men need to own women to be powerful." *On Blast* will run every other week, and will also be broadcast on the Philly IMC's Internet station, Radio Volta (radiovolta.org).

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Music, of course, is another vital part of WPEB's programming. One music show that celebrates Philly's musical history, and vindicates vinyl purists, is a three-hour exploration of music from 1966 to '76 hosted by Milan Marvelous and Andrew Ennis. Although the show is still untitled (they figure their working title, "High Speed Line," is too Jersey), they recorded a demo using one mic, their turntables and a computer mixing program.

"The first hour is open format with forgotten music, digging out things you don't hear anymore," says Ennis, a soft-spoken record enthusiast who also fronts the Philly soul revival band The Chants.

"We're also going to play on a friendly rivalry between the two of us and showcase our newest record finds," says Marvelous, who is the more voluble of the two and runs The Marvelous, a record and musical instrument store on 40th and Walnut. The second hour will feature a theme each week, either a particular artist, label, style, year or something else to revolve around. Listeners can call in during the third hour and request songs or talk to guests.



"A goal of the show is to bring in some of the personalities who made this music in for interviews," says Marvelous. "Maybe one of the Dells, or Sylvia Johnson's producer."

Others shows in WPEB's starting lineup will encompass everything from community call-in to news and media issues. The station is still actively looking for more.

RIGHT NOW, WPEB IS STILL KIND OF SMALL. EVEN WHEN THE NEW STATION OPENS, IT WILL STILL BROADCAST — BY means of a point-to-point wireless link — from that 1-watt Calvary Church transmitter. And Scribe is acting as a steward of the license until WPEB is a secure enough entity to operate on its own.

None of that dents the optimism of the station's members, or, necessarily, its chances. Shows are in place for the first live broadcast on the 17th; the board of managers election is coming up; an Internet feed of the station is planned; and members are looking into ways to expand their signal through better antenna placement and translator stations (stations that would repeat the signal in the area). Hardworking members, like proud parents, predict the station will take off once it goes live.

"We're kind of operating under the assumption that 'If you build it, they will come,'" says Welton. "I think that there are a lot of people who are waiting for the live broadcasting to actually happen and we anticipate that a lot of people will start coming forward once that happens."

At the final general meeting before the launch, the longtime members look tired but determined to make the push necessary to launch the station in less than two weeks. Members pledge to go by the station and help finish up the construction, flier the area for the launch party and plan the festivities.

Still, even after the launch, their work has only begun.

"We've got to think about what we're going to do on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday," says Louis Massiah, a member of the governance committee and the executive director of Scribe.

One reason to keep enthusiasm up is that new prospective members keep showing up to the meetings. Several teenagers from the area as well as older residents have come to offer help and suggestions. Fabian Barbarbin had never attended a meeting before but quickly volunteered to help with outreach. "I've been very fortunate and this is a way of giving back. This can give a voice to the community and hopefully unite it," he says.

Members hope that WPEB's drawing power and importance to the community it wants to serve will only increase after they push that button and cross the invisible line on the air.

"I've built a lot of stations, and the difference before and after a station launches is dramatic," says Gunn. "It goes from a bunch of overworked, dedicated people to a vital resource. WPEB is really needed in West Philly so people can participate in media instead of just consuming it."

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