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Silverstein simultaneously upholds tradition, leads progress at WXXI

By: Kevin Oklobzija August 4, 2021



When he arrived in Rochester in December of 1995, hired by WXXI Public Broadcasting Council to run its radio and television operations, Norm Silverstein assumed there would be a very finite timeline to his stay.

A New Jersey native who had spent significant time working in Maryland in commercial and public broadcasting as well as government, he anticipated guiding WXXI through the transformation to digital and then moving on to his next challenge.

A quarter century later, Silverstein is still overseeing all facets of WXXI's now expansive portfolio of media entities and has no plans to leave his State Street office. There's still too much to do.

"I have to admit, I thought I'd be here five to seven years," Silverstein said recently. "My wife (Jane Gallagher Silverstein) has said it's the only thing that I haven't succeeded at."

She's probably right.

Under Silverstein's stewardship, WXXI's television operations have grown from one over-the-air and one cable station to four digital and one cable station. The radio side has expanded from an AM and FM station to six signals.

In 2011, the organization ventured far outside the box by adding a five-screen cinema (The Little Theatre). And in 2019 it completed the purchase of City, the independent for-profit newspaper focused on news and the arts and entertainment scene.

"There have been times over the years where — I call it being pinged by a recruiter or someone else — there were opportunities, but it seemed like there was always something important that we were doing here," he said.

Which is why he's now entrenched in the community and very much a Rochesterian.

"We're a much different organization than what we were 25 years ago," Silverstein, 68, said. "The goal was to make sure that WXXI was an institution that really served the community and that we didn't fall behind the commercial broadcasters and others in technology.

"We've expanded greatly, really to keep up with what's been going on in the rest of the world!"

During his tenure, WXXI has undergone two major fund-raising initiatives. The 21/21 Vision Campaign of 2004 raised \$12 million. The Go Public Campaign that closed in 2016 raised \$18 million.

With a staff of close to 120 and an annual budget of nearly \$16.5 million for all entities under the WXXI umbrella, donations are critical. Just 25 percent of funding comes from the government, so much of Silverstein's work is dedicated to the sponsorship efforts.

"I think the longevity has been really helpful in terms of getting to know people and them getting to know me, and trusting that we'd be good stewards of their money," he said.

The manner in which WXXI raises money has changed dramatically.

"We've really cut back on the on-air drives," he said. "We want to get away from pledge drives as much as possible. People just find it to be an interruption for what they tune in for. We would prefer to find other ways to raise money.

"Public radio and public television grew up over the years so that a \$60 pledge gets you a tote bag mentality. But we started changing the way we raise money years ago. We want people to understand we are a destiny for a philanthropic gift, so we've gotten several million-dollar gifts over the years and that's made a big difference," he added.

Supporting local journalism

His next project: Raising "significant" money to support local journalism. His first job was as a reporter and he's still very much a journalist at heart.

"We have kicked around the number of \$10 million," Silverstein said.

He believes the campaign is necessary because he's worried about where the media's place in the world is headed. Fake news and falsified stories abound on social media. And as newspaper and television ownership groups continue to downsize reporting staffs, there is far less coverage of government and other essential matters.

"We feel that's very important right now — the community needs it," he said. "It's clear around the county, where papers in particular have either gone out of business or have really shrunk, it changes the coverage of what goes on in those communities. And that's where you run into problems."

Indeed, with fewer media outlets providing independent oversight of things like municipal board meetings and local legislative bodies, decisions involving taxpayer money can be made without community awareness.

"We believe pretty firmly that strong local journalism is important to the health of the community, to get information that you trust, that's independent," Silverstein said.

That's why, about six years ago, WXXI began expanding its news coverage on the radio. Then the organization bought City in 2019.

"He's always looking over the horizon and saying, 'What's the next thing we need to do, what's the next the community needs?'" said Kathy Reed, vice president of major and planned giving for WXXI. "He gets how important XXI is to the community."

The acquisition of City was a unique venture. While WXXI is not-for-profit, City exists to make money and was always independently owned and operated by Mary Anna and Bill Towler. When they neared retirement, they went looking for someone dedicated to serving the community, someone that would carry on their legacy.

They went to Silverstein.

"At the time we were thinking this would be a great addition to what we're doing covering arts and culture," he said, "but Mary Anna Towler (a former co-owner with husband Bill) stopped me and said, 'You can't just do arts coverage, you've got to be covering what's going on locally.' That influenced the direction we took and who we hired to run the paper (editor David Andreatta, who jumped to City from his position as news columnist for the Democrat and Chronicle)."

“It was not an easy decision, but what I like about it was I knew we could eventually combine the newsrooms and then that would create some critical mass or reporting, and we’re really moving in that direction.”

The COVID-19 pandemic created a major obstacle for City, however. Advertising dollars disappeared as the virus forced businesses in the food and entertainment sector to close.

“When the pandemic hit, alternative papers across the country lost 95 percent of their sponsorships, their advertising, literally overnight; we were in the same boat,” Silverstein said. “We had to stop publication briefly and then find a way we could bring back and preserve it.”

Instead of producing a weekly newspaper, the print version now is monthly, and Silverstein prefers to call it a magazine. But the website publishes news every day, and City reporters are prominent on WXXI radio programs.

“The pandemic made it a heavier lift than we were anticipating, but we thought it was important to preserve another source of local journalism, and that was really important to the whole community, not just XXI,” Silverstein said.

He wasn’t about to lose City, however.

“He has always cared so deeply for news and journalism,” Reed said. “We’re more about long-form journalism; we’re more about the why, and what we can do to bring the community together.”

Just as taking over the Little was very much outside-the-box thinking, so, too was the purchase of City.

“It would have been easy to say, ‘That’s not what we do, let’s just stay focused on our one core area,’” said Robert Healy, chair of the WXXI board of trustees. “But you need somebody that’s willing to embrace that change and provide enthusiasm.

“He could have stuck with what he had but the organization would have been so much less without the Little and City.”

Local projects make big waves

WXXI radio is focused on local. TV is more national and international, but Silverstein is considering a three- or four-minute local news segment to TV.

Several programs produced by the Rochester staff are carried by PBS stations across the country. One show is “Second Opinion with Joan Lunden,” a National health program now in its 18th season.

“In Rochester, we produce a show that’s carried by about 250 public television stations across the country and is really the only regularly scheduled health program on PBS,” Silverstein said.

Documentaries on the renovation of Kodak Hall at Eastman Theatre and Rochester’s history in the garment industry, “Tailor Made,” have been picked up across the network of PBS stations.

Silverstein also has his own show, “Norm and Company,” which features Rochesterians that wouldn’t necessarily be in the news or on TV. The show’s genesis traces to the late Bill Pearce, WXXI’s previous president who hosted “The Rochester I Know.”

“When I got here, my staff said, ‘You should take that over.’ I said, ‘Well, I don’t know Rochester,’” Silverstein said.

Over time, however, after a guest host had filled the void, Silverstein realized he should fill the host’s chair.

“We found that people love to hear about people in Rochester that they didn’t always know their background,” he said. “That’s been great having the opportunity to do that.”

Access to educational programming

At the foundation of WXXI is education, a point accentuated during the pandemic.

“I still consider education to be the most important thing we do,” Silverstein said. “We lost count of how many hours of additional curriculum-based programming we put on during the pandemic so that kids at home would have access to some programming that they were missing at school.

“Some people were saying, ‘Well, why would they need you; everyone has a computer and the internet.’ That’s not true. What we found is that a lot of people did not have high-speed internet, particularly in rural areas and the inner city. And sometimes when kids wanted to use the computer, someone was working from home and using it, so in addition to putting things online, we also put programming on air.”

WXXI also has a presence on many social media platforms. The organization uses its YouTube channel to reach middle and high school children with the series, “I Can Do What?,” which examines good careers that don’t require a college education. The organization intends to do even more online.

“We’re planning to meet people where they are,” Silverstein said.

Along the way, he somehow finds time to advocate for what’s important in the industry while also serving other community endeavors. He chairs the finance committee of the New York State Broadcasters Association and is on the induction committee for the Women’s Hall of Fame. On his office wall is a sword, a thank you from the state public broadcasting association for his tireless efforts to “lead the charge.”

“I was with Norm in Washington at the Public Media Summit and lobby day and I saw first-hand how respected he is by his peers,” Healy said. “He’s viewed as a leader and others in the industry seek out his input”

Silverstein said he merely upholds tradition.

“I think people have an expectation that XXI is different and puts the community first,” he said. “It is a source of pride, and the people that work here are the real source of pride. I couldn’t have accomplished half of this without the staff we have.

“It’s a standing joke: I get tapped on the shoulder in the store and someone says, ‘Thank you.’ I say, ‘You’re welcome, what did I do?’ And inevitably they say, ‘I couldn’t live without XXI.’ It’s kind of hard to give that up.”

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Norm Silverstein

Title: President and CEO, WXXI Public Broadcasting Council

Age: 68

Residence: Pittsford

Education: B.A., political science, American University; Master of Advanced Studies, John Hopkins University; graduate of the IESE advanced management program.

Family: Wife Jane Gallagher Silverstein; sons Ben and Lee.

Hobbies: Working, volunteering and “as people who know me would say, working.”

Quote: “We feel (local journalism is) very important right now — the community needs it. It’s clear around the county, where papers in particular have either gone out of business or have really shrunk, it changes the coverage of what goes on in those communities. And that’s where you run into problems.”