



Broadcasting Wild Alaska

The hard work, enthusiasm, and commitment that make up radio station KICY

MICHAEL COGLAN

Alaska has captured the American imagination. Television viewers are endlessly fascinated by the dangerous and challenging work of pilots, police, truckers, loggers, fishermen, and prospectors. Yes, it is “tougher in Alaska.” That’s true for radio broadcasters as well.

Imagine thirty-five degrees below zero and wind howling off the Bering Sea. Standing against the cold wind are three red radio towers held in place by high-tension steel cables. The enormous towers catch a glint from the sun as it makes a brief daily appearance during the winter months.

Two figures are struggling over the frozen landscape. They plod over the crust of snow toward the eight-foot fences that surround each of the towers. With the snow piled seven feet high, they merely step over the top of the fence and rush to carry out their repairs. They must hurry to use the short window of light they have available. Both are thickly clothed and wearing parkas and heavily insulated boots. Neither is looking forward to taking off their gloves to use their sockets and screwdrivers.

This isn’t a scene from a reality televi-

sion program; this is reality.

One of the men is my son, Ian Coglan. Only months after graduating from North Park University in Chicago, he moved to Nome, Alaska, to serve as a missionary intern for KICY radio. The other man is Dennis Weidler, station manager and adviser to the Arctic Broadcasting Association, an affiliate of the Evangelical Covenant Church.

KICY radio has operated for more than fifty years. Broadcasting a Christian message as well as world news and public service information, it is a vital connection for more than forty remote villages. The most unique service of this station is Russian language programming. KICY is the only U.S. radio station fully licensed to broadcast into a foreign country in its residents’ language.

The long history of KICY is a story of faith, sacrifice, and pure adventure. And like all good stories, KICY has had great heights and devastating lows. The lowest point came in the late 1990s. The station had endured controversies over format in much the same way as many churches were struggling with worship styles. In 1997, a small aircraft crashed into one of the radio towers killing a pilot and a

small boy. Operating expenses had spiked and the station was more than \$1 million in debt. In the wake of an identity crisis combined with tragedy and crushing debt, KICY very nearly ceased operation.

It took the hard work of the right leader to bring it back from the brink.

It is a pleasant summer drive from Nome to a camp called Council. One of the few roads in the area runs along the Bering Sea through stark treeless land. Travelers often stop at a strange tourist attraction along the way called the Last Train to Nowhere. Rusting locomotives and equipment are slowly sinking into the ground where a failed railroad experiment might have assisted the mining industry.



Dennis Weidler prepares a salmon he caught for a KICY fundraising dinner.

Station manager Dennis Weidler travels this road each summer, looking forward to some salmon fishing. He has good reason to enjoy the drive and to feel contented after thirteen years of dramatic ministry. However, these are not vacation days for him. Part of Dennis's eclectic responsibili-

ties for the station is catching enough fresh salmon for the unique fundraisers he hosts in churches across the Lower Forty-eight. If you are fortunate enough to attend one of these limited events, you will enjoy a traditional native Alaskan meal cooked by Dennis himself. And you will hear an inspiring story of what can happen when we step out of our comfort zone and answer the call of God.

Dennis and his wife, Candace, were enjoying a prosperous life in Kalamazoo, Michigan, when they were contacted about the need for a station manager at KICY. Dennis owned his own communications business and recording studio. His experience in radio production was especially interesting to the Arctic Broadcasting Association. Reluctantly, the Weidlers listened to the pitch and even visited Nome. Although they committed to pray about the matter, neither anticipated how much God would fill their hearts with love for the people of Nome and the surrounding area.

Back home in Michigan, the Weidlers couldn't stop thinking about KICY. Dennis took stock of the challenges this would require. Yet even as he became consumed with the idea, he restrained himself. He knew the challenge would require sacrifice, espe-



Ian Coglan at the controls of KICY in Nome

cially from Candace, and he wanted to allow her time and space to process the call on her own. Then during one special worship service at Kalamazoo Covenant Church, Candace turned to Dennis and said, "We have to go to Nome."

Soon their business was for sale and an adventure was underway. Once they had accepted God's call, Dennis never feared that he would fail. He quickly went to work building a network of goodwill for the station throughout the city. He adjusted the programming format to better suit the audience and established new structure for the operation. His broad range of responsibilities included radio production, personnel management, fundraising, marketing, and an endless list of physically demanding tasks. "I didn't know it at the time," says Dennis, "but I had spent twenty-seven years in training for this job."

The expertise Dennis brought would completely transform the station. The listening audience grew, advertising expanded, and new donors emerged. Dennis pounced on an opportunity to expand signal strength so KICY could transmit more than a thousand miles further into Russia. Testimonies from blessed listeners were celebrated. Every penny of debt was paid off. Even when a transmitter was lost due to an electri-

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cal fire, progress was uninhibited. Dennis's enthusiasm has also attracted a succession of volunteers and missionaries to help run the station.

Those who serve are changed for life.

Night is pitch black and often deathly cold and silent in winter. But inside a small gym on Friday nights, it is bright, warm, and loud. Unbelievably loud. Local residents follow high-school basketball with tribal passion. Visiting teams arrive by bush plane, and village fans travel great distances by snow machine. Often every seat is taken and folks jockey for the remaining standing room.

Feeding off this energy at many games is a lanky, 6' 7" radio announcer, taller than any of the players on the court. Steve Palmatier is not playing, but he is just as engaged in the game as any competitor. Before the game he spent hours memorizing the pronunciation of the player names.

"Here's Weyovanna bringing the ball up, swings it over to the wing, now back to Weyovanna at the top of the key. Now he takes it in, drives to the hoop, lays it up and—scores! Oh, a pretty play by Weyovanna. He's got nine points here in the third quarter, twenty-two for the game."

Even harder than learning the pronunciation, Steve often has great challenges setting up his equipment for the games. He has to pack and tote most of the broadcast equipment himself aboard a bush plane, and then find creative ways to make it all work. He has become quite adept at the technical side of things, but his gift is in announcing. He effortlessly recalls player statistics as he calls the game. Steve is appreciated by the many KICY listeners who could not make the trip to the gym. He transmits not just the facts, but the energy of the event.

The life of a missionary intern is

very busy, to say the least. Steve joined my son Ian after they finished studies at North Park. They share an apartment and many of the responsibilities of the station. Each has daily weekday shows and a list of technical programming responsibilities as well as many odd chores. To supplement the support they receive from donors back home, they also work additional jobs. Ian is a substitute public-school teacher, and Steve writes sports columns for the *Nome Nugget* newspaper. Both also volunteer with youth programs at the Nome Covenant Church.

Together with long-term volunteer Lon Swanson, Ian and Steve work under the leadership of Dennis. Other local volunteers round out the team. They believe in the mission, and they do whatever it takes—rain or shine, light or dark, cold or really cold. As seasons change, the tasks and projects alter as well. The high point of the year is the historic Iditarod Sled Dog Race in March when Nome swells with more than 1,000 visitors. A festival atmosphere awaits the mushers who race here all the way from Anchorage.

The station erects a scaffold on the property of the Nome Covenant Church, only a few feet away from the Iditarod finish line. Announcers



From a scaffold in front of Nome Covenant Church, Steve and Ian announce the results of the Iditarod race.



Ian Coglan (center) and Steve Palmatier cover the high-school basketball game.

on the structure are affectionately called "The Eye in the Sky." Portable technical equipment must be carted to strategic sites. Race fans, sponsors, and competitors are interviewed on the street and broadcast over the air. Goodwill to the station for this service is enormous. If you want to hear live coverage at the finish line of the most famous event in the field of sled dog racing, you won't find it on ESPN. You have to tune in to KICY.

According to legend, it was a dejected miner who discovered gold on the beach in Nome. He had arrived too late to stake a claim near the gold strikes on the inland creeks. Now broke, he had to camp on the beach, where he discovered that the treasure he was looking for was right there on the ground in front of him.

Our church discovered a treasure in Nome, and it's right here in our own denomination. Ian's excitement for radio ministry in western Alaska spilled into excitement throughout our congregation. The radio station is a beacon of hope to a diverse field on two different continents and in two different languages. Reality TV has nothing on this life-giving ministry in outrageous conditions on the edge of civilization.

When gold was discovered in Nome a century ago, people were recklessly eager to be a part of the adventure. Today western Alaska remains a goldmine of opportunity to share the love of God. For more information on giving, serving, or hosting a salmon dinner discussion, visit kicy.org. ■