Air Apparent
Joe Lewin turns air into ideas at WHTM/abc27

By Barbara Trainin Blank

The fascination Joe Lewin has felt with television since early childhood has continued unabated. How many CEOs have not one but three TV sets in their office?

Their presence is entirely “legitimate,” however. Joe is president-general manager of Allbritton Communication’s ABC affiliate, WHTM/abc 27 in Harrisburg.

Unlike some successful people who take turns before arriving at their professional destination, Joe has never wanted to do anything but work in media. The dream started when he was 6 years old, and his family (from Cincinnati) went on vacation to New York City.
“We had a TV in our hotel room, and I had never seen one before,” he recalls. “Everyone else wanted to see the sights, and I wanted to watch TV. It really made an impression. I watched Mr. I.Magination over and over and was enchanted.”

He obtained a communications degree from the University of Cincinnati, launching his career at the same time. As a freshman, Joe was hired by WLWT, the NBC affiliate, in its production department. He stayed there for 22 years in a variety of positions—including creating a film company for Avco Broadcasting. When the station was sold to Multimedia Broadcasting, he moved into sales and eventually became WLWT’s station manager.

One highlight of his tenure as station manager was hiring a local politician to do commentaries. “Later he went on to become the station’s 6 and 11 P.M. news anchor and then had his own nationally syndicated show. He is Jerry Springer.”

Entrepreneurship seems to run in Joe’s family. His father, the son of German immigrants, started his own plumbing business and remained self-employed most of his career. His mother was a nurse, though she didn’t work after the children came along—Joe has a brother and two sisters.

The woman who shares Joe’s life is also a nurse. Dee, his high-school sweetheart whom he married in 1961, specialized in gerontology. She recently got a degree in parish nursing at their church.

The couple has four children who are carrying on the entrepreneurial tradition: Chris is a stockbroker, Andy has a construction business, Joel works for Time Warner in New York City, and Cara owns a real estate company. Each of them has three children.

It was their children and grandchildren’s location on the East Coast that ultimately brought the Lewins to Harrisburg. Prior to that, Joe was general manager of the ABC station in Richmond and of the NBC station in Baltimore—which later changed to ABC.

Then in 1996 came a life-changing moment. Joe got a call from international recruits looking for “someone with a sense of adventure” to work for a small American company—StoryFirst Communications—that was in the process of establishing a television network in Russia. He and his wife visited Moscow and St. Petersburg and “thoroughly discussed” the possibility of making the huge move, then discussed it some more with their children and took the plunge.

The Lewins spent the next 3 years in Moscow—an experience he calls “absolutely fabulous and once in a lifetime.” It started with a Berlitz crash course in Russian and a private teacher in Moscow to learn the language.

The network he worked for, CTC, became the third most watched channel in Russia and continues to this day to be successful. “At the time, it was unique because it had no political point of view and no news—only entertainment. This was something new for Russia. CTC was patterned after the American model, targeting young demographics.”

The programming was mostly older American sitcoms and dramatic shows, such as Dallas and Star Trek, plus South American telenovellas—all dubbed into Russian.

“There are 11 time zones in Russia, and the established channels, which were totally or partially owned and operated by the government, were traditionally sent upon one satellite signal from Moscow. That meant that a show that was on the air in Moscow at 8 P.M. would be received in Vladivostok—in the Far East—at 5 A.M. We sent our signals at five different times so that viewers had the opportunity to watch our shows at reasonable times of the evening. This was something new—customer service.”
Part of Joe’s job was traveling across Russia to visit the ten stations owned by StoryFirst, primarily via Aeroflot. He would meet with staff at each station and teach the basics of selling air time and the concept of customer service and marketing. Joe and Dee also got to travel throughout Europe, including Greece, Turkey, the Republic of Georgia, Ukraine, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, and the Czech Republic.

Perhaps most appealing to Joe and Dee, who worked at the U.S. State Department’s Medical Center at the Embassy, was that they “made friends for life.” The couple has returned for visits, and some of those friends have visited the states.

Had their children not started having children of their own, the Lewins might have stayed in Russia longer. Fortunately, a friend told Joe the Allbritton Company was looking for a general manager in Harrisburg. The couple moved here in 1999.

“The really good news is that abc27 was such a good, solid station with a terrific tradition of service to the community and on-air excellence. Since we’ve been here, we have added newscasts at 7 p.m., 4:30 a.m., 5 a.m., Saturdays and Sundays at 9 a.m., and Sunday night at 11:30 p.m.

Abc27 now brings five-and-a-half hours of news, weather, and sports to viewers every day—“more than any other station in the market,” he says.

Joe is particularly proud of a recent honor given to the station by the National Association of Broadcasters Service to America in Washington, D.C. The community award was given for the work the station did following an Allison Hill row home fire last October in which five people—four of them children under 5—died. There was no smoke alarm in the house, so the station, in cooperation with Kidde and the Harrisburg fire bureau, went door to door distributing thousands of free alarms.

The award was presented to WHTM and anchor Valerie Pritchett, news director Dennis Fisher, promotion manager Betty Fish, and to Joe himself.

Community service is something he promotes at the station and also incorporates into his personal life. He just finished his first year as chairman of the board of the Harrisburg Symphony Orchestra. “It’s pretty much a second job. But the orchestra is a wonderful asset to central Pennsylvania. We are so blessed to have Stuart Malina [music director] and this talented group of musicians, as well as a dedicated and equally talented staff here. It is a real pleasure and honor for me to be able to contribute to the success of the HSO.”

Joe is also on the board of the Ned Smith Center for Nature and the Arts in Millersburg and previously was on the board of United Way of the Capital Region; he helps the campaign every year. Previously he was president of the VA Association of Broadcasters and in 2010 was named Pennsylvania Broadcaster of the Year by the state association.

Joe is proud of his station’s position: the Harrisburg-Lancaster-Lebanon-York market is the 41st largest in the country. It is also geographically large, made up of ten central Pennsylvania counties.

But there are challenges. A major one is keeping up with technology, such as the transition from analog to digital 2 years ago. Within the next few months, abc27 will be broadcast totally in high definition. Everything will be server-based; there’ll be no more video tape. All editing will be done on laptops. Cameras continue to get smaller, lighter, cheaper, and better.

But the cost of transition is very high. “We had a perfectly good analog transmitter but had to replace it. We had no choice. It’s a great benefit to viewers. Everything gets better. But there’s no immediate return on investment.”
In addition to work and family, Joe loves classical music and reads a lot. Recently he completed *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornets’ Nest*, the third book by the late novelist Stieg Larsson, and Stephen Ambrose’s *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West*. American history is a particular interest, but while in Russia he accumulated a large library of that country’s classic literature and history books.

Needless to say, he also loves television and, as a sculpture in his office proclaims, being “On Air.”