

CONNECT LOCAL INTELLIGENCE
RELEVANT LISTENER-FOCUS
PARTNER TRUSTED RELIABLE
TOGETHER **RESILIENCE** SOURCE
COMMUNITY SUPPORT PARTNER
REPORT VERIFY HUMAN
INCLUSION COURAGE TRUST

“Facts are our currency.”

Joe O'Connor | President & CEO

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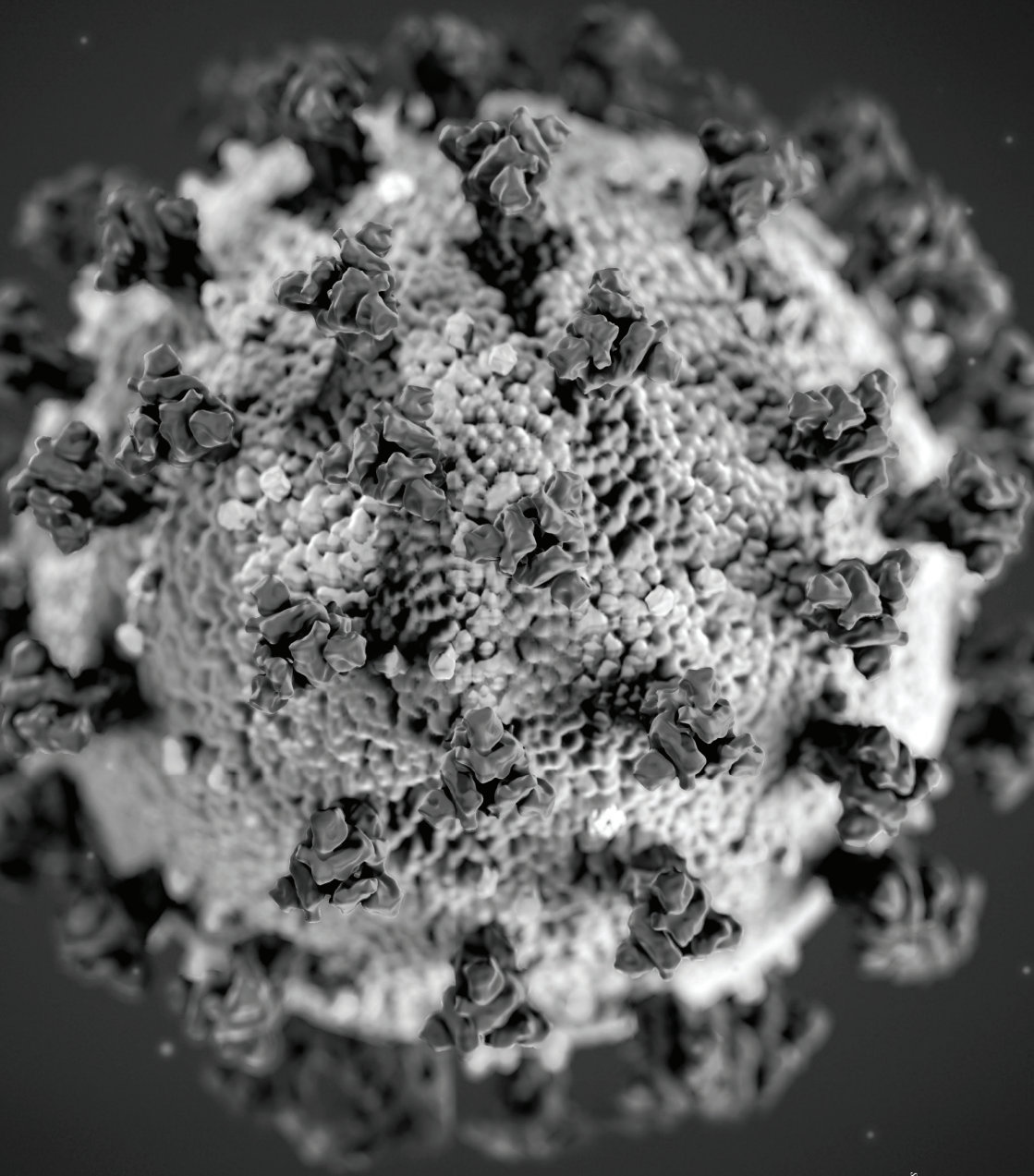
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It was the worst of times.

A GLOBAL PANDEMIC HIT THE UNITED STATES *harder than it did any other country* IN 2020 AND 2021.





WEARING A MASK *or not* HAS BECOME A POLITICAL STATEMENT.

PROTESTS ACROSS THE COUNTRY *including Charlotte* WERE THE RESULT OF CENTURIES OF JUSTIFIABLE ANGER OVER SYSTEMIC RACISM.



WER



Credit: Rosemary Ketchum from Pexels



De-Militarize the

"I CAN BREATHE
R.I.P. GEORGE

LET US
BE BLACK
in PEACE

I CANT
BREATHE

Credit: Ramon Parliade

Credit: Life Matters from Pixels



IN TOO MANY WAYS



WE WERE A DIVIDED PEOPLE.





Credit: Brent Stirton | Getty Images

AN INSURRECTION AT THE U.S. CAPITOL TERRIFIED LAWMAKERS and most of THE COUNTRY.

Even in all this,
there were signs of hope.

The protests got people's attention — shifting something in our collective consciousness. *As a nation, we began confronting America's long history of racism and finally addressing it.*

Journalists were reviled in some corners and had to confront more than rhetoric. They found themselves bearing witness to violent upheaval.

Throughout this tumultuous time, one thing has become clear ... *when misinformation is rampant, facts matter.*

And with listener support, facts are exactly what WFAE has always, reliably delivered. *Our role has always been to keep the public informed on the latest guidance and to confront and dispel disinformation.*

Our mission

**JOURNALISM
THAT
INFORMS,
ENRICHES
AND
INSPIRES.**

Our vision

**A MORE
KNOWLEDGABLE
AND ENGAGED
COMMUNITY
GROUNDED IN
OUR SHARED
HUMANITY.**

FROM OUR BOARD CHAIR

Dear WFAE Listener and Supporter,

On behalf of the entire Board of WFAE, I offer my sincerest thanks for the generosity you have shown to our trusted news source during these past two years. As you may be aware, WFAE celebrated its 40th anniversary as an NPR station on June 30, 2021 – 40 years on the scene!

The 24 months detailed in this report were some of the most trying our community ... in fact, the most trying that our community and society has ever experienced.

Through a pandemic, political upheaval, protests for social justice, a racial reckoning and so much more, WFAE's reporters were there, on the scene, providing our community with the information we needed to stay healthy, safe and informed.

As schools closed, went to virtual learning, re-opened ... and in some cases re-closed, education reporter Ann Doss Helms gave us the reports we needed to know how to keep our children safe.

Political reporter Steve Harrison helped us understand how to vote during the restrictions and concerns brought on by the pandemic, the contentious local elections, the Carolinas' place in national elections and the impact of the insurrection at the Capitol.

Mike Collins and the *Charlotte Talks* team brought us interviews with local officials, experts and community members that gave us the important perspective and nuance we needed to understand the whirlwind of issues impacting us each day. The Friday news roundup became required listening if you wanted to know the important issues of the day impacting our local communities.

Health reporters Dana Miller Ervin and Claire Donnelly provided daily reports on how the pandemic was impacting our communities, where and how to get vaccinated and more.

Investigative reporter Sarah Delia shared stories of our friends and neighbors whose resiliency brought them through the challenges of the last two years. She did this much in the way she did for her ground-breaking podcast series *She Says*.

Climate reporter David Boraks shared the story of asbestos pits in Davidson. He also provided wide-ranging coverage of the climate crisis and how it is playing out here in Charlotte and North Carolina.

Joni Deutsch's *Amplifier* podcast and her live lunch hour concerts with local musicians gave us a needed connection to the arts and music when we were all stuck inside.



With his *SouthBound* podcast and *On My Mind* commentaries, Tommy Tomlinson brought voice and perspective to the shared trauma of these past two years. As I like to say, Tommy always hit the nail on the head with his commentaries; they were always right on time.

Our news anchors Gwendolyn Glenn, Marshall Terry and Nick de la Canal provided the calm and consistency amidst the chaos.

Our Race & Equity Team reporters Sarah Mobley Smith, Gracyn Doctor, Dante Miller and Maria Ramirez Uribe have worked across the WFAE newsroom to help our coverage reflect the voices and stories of our diverse community.

I thank everyone in the WFAE newsroom who provided our community with the news we've needed. I also thank the content and business office leadership at WFAE who lead their teams to record audience levels — both in terms of the number of people listening to the station and the diversity of listeners — and keep the station operating with the quality you expect. Because of your support we were able to grow and achieved the sixth consecutive year of fundraising records.

I am so proud to be associated with this exceptional organization, dedicated and talented Board of Directors and honored to share that, through the challenges of FY20 and FY21, Charlotte's NPR News Source is stronger than ever!

Thank you again for your steadfast support of WFAE – 40 more years on the case!

Sincerely,



Richard Lancaster
Board Chair

“Through the challenges of FY20 and FY21, Charlotte's NPR News Source is stronger than ever.”

FROM OUR CEO

Our individual health ... the health of our democracy ... our economic stability ... the very ideals that we cherish as Americans.

So much has been at risk these past two years of the pandemic. And we're not out of the woods.

At no other time in my life have I seen so much division and so much seclusion.

Political rancor, racial division and pandemic distancing have physically and psychologically pulled us away from one another.

But in this time of division, WFAE has endeavored to be a connecting point – a bridge that connects our community.

Together, through WFAE, we have suffered, endured and mourned. But we have also discovered moments of joy, levity and celebration ... together.

We are still here.

And WFAE connected every corner of our community as we sheltered in place, home schooled our kids and Zoomed all over.

Our fearless reporters took to the streets as protests over racial injustice echoed through Uptown. They took us to hospitals to speak with the frontline healthcare workers at the peak of the pandemic. They took us to schools, businesses, shelters and homeless encampments to bring us all not just the facts, but the context all of us must hear to understand.

They took us to where we couldn't, or wouldn't, go.

I am in awe of each member of our staff, whether in a hospital emergency room, ducking a tear gas canister or tracking our financials in support of our mission under the most strenuous of circumstances.

And I couldn't be more thankful for the support you provided to fuel their perseverance.

As WFAE made deeper connections with our community during this tumultuous time, a record number of listeners, streamers and users, all more diverse than ever before, relied on facts when they mattered the most. We proudly boast one of the highest percentages of African American listeners of all NPR news stations.

There is still much work to be done to better represent our community, which is why I am so pleased our Race & Equity Team, the vision of Executive Vice President & Chief Content Officer Ju-Don Marshall, is up and running. This group of culturally competent journalists is working across the newsroom to ensure that all of our coverage is deepened through the experience of diversity.



As our audience grew, so did the support that we received from you. Listeners from every ZIP code came together to support us. In total, a record 24,698 contributors donated to WFAE in FY21. Their support brought us to our sixth consecutive year of record investment in our service.

Thank you.

Your donations to WFAE have been invested to grow and diversify our newsroom and staff. I am pleased to share that we have doubled the number of positions since 2015, and we are still hiring!

During this time of great loss and anxiety, there have been so many moments of inspiration and hope.

That hope comes from the dedication of our entire staff as well as your incredible support during one of the most challenging times in our nation's history.

As we celebrate our 40th year of service to the community, I remain so grateful to serve this remarkable staff, board and community as we emerge from the pandemic stronger, together.

Onward!



Joe O'Connor
President & CEO

“In this time of division, WFAE has endeavored to be a connecting point – a bridge that connects our community.”

It seems like a lifetime ago ...



MASKS WERE ONLY FOR SURGEONS AND CHILDREN AT HALLOWEEN.



NO ONE HAD DIED OF COVID-19.





GEORGE FLOYD AND BREONNA TAYLOR WEREN'T NATIONALLY KNOWN.





IN 2020 AND 2021, BEING INFORMED BECAME
EVEN MORE VITAL TO ONE'S HEALTH AND SAFETY.



Credit: Davis Turner / Getty Images

“WFAE has become much more critical to people’s lives these past two years,” said Joe O’Connor, the station’s president and CEO. *“People tune in because they want to know how to keep themselves and the republic safe.”*

And in an era that saw disease, death, destruction and the harshest economic conditions in generations, *WFAE listeners showed immense appreciation for a news source they trusted.* During a period when people, businesses and entire industries suffered and many shut down, *WFAE managed to have a record year by nearly every measure.*

Immediate past board chair Mark Ethridge — novelist, screenwriter and former managing editor of *The Charlotte Observer* — said *2020 was a year of success through adversity.*

It's a statement that's remarkable since this is a time in which merely surviving is cause for celebration.

“We are resilient” is the headline WFAE’s executive vice president and chief content officer Ju-Don Marshall said she’d give the last two years. *“Despite challenges, fears, setbacks and our current uncertainty, our community has relied on and supported us to soldier on. It’s inspiring.”*

CEO Joe O’Connor considers “the spirit of the WFAE staff” to be one of the station’s greatest accomplishments of the past two years. “There’ve been so many reasons to fear, to be concerned about your own personal well-being. *On top of everything else, the staff relentlessly, on an hour-by-hour basis, is dedicated to helping others.*”

WFAE was one of only four public radio stations in the top 30 markets that had more weekly listeners in June 2021 than June 2016. *The station has also seen its Black listeners double over the last few years, and has one of the largest percentage of Black audiences of NPR news stations across the country. The station set a record of 32% Black listeners in July 2021.*

Greater Public, a professional development association for public media fundraisers shared that from FY14 to FY20, WFAE's revenues have grown 99.91%, making us *the nation's fastest growing station with a budget over \$1 million and the second fastest-growing station overall.*

EVP Ju-Don Marshall attributes the growth to WFAE providing timely, relevant and critical local news and information to the community. "We

see that our efforts to listen, respond to and reflect the community's needs are paying off for us," Marshall said. "Simply put, when we show up for them, they show up for us."

Perhaps it's also a hunger for fact-based news, delivered reliably and without bias. "WFAE strives to present the facts in detail and in context, and help listeners draw logical conclusions," said Nick Wharton, co-chair of WFAE's board of directors and CEO of The Charlotte Area Fund, a community action agency fighting poverty. "They've not been political."

Having a successful 2020 (and '21) was far from assured. *Charlotte Talks* host Mike Collins said, "Joe O'Connor has always told us: 'Never be afraid to fail.' That's essentially what we did every day — tried new broadcast techniques to bring people the news they need. *We've been unafraid.*"

“ THESE JOURNALISTS HAVE SEEN IT ALL.

THEY'RE GOOD AT GETTING TO THE TRUTH. 

Joe O'Connor / CEO

facts

are

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Claire Donnelly / Healthcare Reporter

” WE TRY NOT TO LET THOSE VOICES DEFEAT US. “





FAKE NEWS

FACT **CONSPIRACY**



Joe O'Connor / CEO



WE AT WFAE LIVE IN A FACT WORLD. SO MANY AMERICANS ARE LIVING IN CONSPIRACY WORLD.





CONFIRM

TRUTH

FACT

CHECK

TRUTH

VERIFY

VERIFY

FACT

CONFIRM



TRUTH
CONFIRM
DOUBLE-CHECK
EACH
CONFIRM
TRUTH



LIVES



RELIABLE



Credits this page clockwise from the top: John Moore / Getty Images, Life Matters from Pexels, Ethan Miller / Getty Images, Patrick on Unsplash, Mario Tama / Getty Images, Engin Akyurt from Pexels

DEPEND

ON

FACTS



During a time when politicians and pundits were quick to label anything they don't like as "fake news," some Americans have chosen to believe what previously seemed absurd. "We at WFAE live in a fact world," CEO O'Connor said. "So many Americans are living in conspiracy world. *Every American needs reliable facts to participate in a democracy, and facts are under assault now.*"

But at WFAE, facts are our currency. “*We don’t report anything we can’t confirm,*” said Claire Donnelly, the station’s health reporter. “We double-check, we cite our sources. We don’t take this responsibility lightly. *We are the eyes and ears of the public. And that’s the beauty and the burden of what we do.*”

Ensuring WFAE's reporting is accurate takes time and effort. It means questioning everything – even sources you trust. News director Greg Collard said, *“I’m constantly asking: ‘How do you know this?’ Just asking that question is one of my big responsibilities.”*

“At a time of polarization when people believe whatever news outlet seems to conform to their prejudices, we remain very curious and aggressive — a news outlet that wants to know about all points of view,” O’Connor said. *“And we want to know the context behind people’s individual decisions, whether it be about vaccination or not, masking or not. I think our listeners appreciate that.”*

These past two years have changed everything — including journalism. Education reporter Ann Doss Helms said, *“Every time I thought: It can’t get crazier than this, it did.”*

Donning personal protective equipment, dodging smoke grenades and rubber bullets amidst protests and broadcasting remotely from a closet or spare bedroom was not what any of the staff would have predicted, but everyone proved up to the task.

“Every time I thought:
It can’t get any crazier
than this, it did.”

Ann Doss Helms / Education Reporter

“The team stepped up in amazing and innovative ways ... Frankly, our coverage has never been better.”

Ju-Don Marshall



Jobie Sprinkle, director of Engineering/IT, played a huge role in WFAE's transition to remote work. Credit: Jeff Cravotta Photography

It was the most overused word of the last two years. But no synonym for “pivot” was as effective as the word everyone was trying to avoid.

The need for WFAE to pivot came sooner than anyone would’ve liked. Friday, March 13, 2020, was supposed to be the station’s remote test day. But that was the day Mecklenburg County reported its first positive case. Everyone knew, on varying levels, that this was not a test.

“Our team was definitely concerned about how the pandemic would affect our coverage,” said EVP Ju-Don Marshall. “You can’t replicate on-the-ground reporting, especially in radio, via Zoom or phone calls. When we are face-to-face with the community, it builds trust. It allows us to capture nuances — and find other voices — that you’d otherwise miss.”

“But the team stepped up in amazing and innovative ways,” she continued. “We leveraged new tools, protective gear and remote discussion capabilities to bring the community the news, information and the discussions it needed throughout the pandemic, the protests and the elections. Frankly, our coverage has never been better.”

“People think of the news media like a public utility,” said Tommy Tomlinson, veteran reporter, author and host of WFAE’s *SouthBound* podcast and *On My Mind* columnist. “You turn it on and expect it to be there.”

And miraculously, it was. Reporters were outfitted — thanks to chief engineer Jobie Sprinkle — with all the equipment necessary to do their jobs safely from home and from the field.

“What’s really amazing is that we went from being 100% in the office to being nearly 90% remote overnight,” Marshall said. “We’ve had minor hurdles, but Jobie, along with our *Morning Edition* host Marshall Terry, who helped guide the setup for many people on our news team, were instrumental in getting us through that transition.”

Terry said, “I’m very proud of what we’ve been able to accomplish as a team working remotely. I was a skeptic at first. Not only have I been able to do it in a way where I felt comfortable and everybody says they can’t tell a difference, all my colleagues have been able to do it. I’ve been just amazed. It’s definitely been in the most challenging and the most exciting year I’ve ever had at the station.”

While the news of the day may have been troubling, there’s a certain consolation in hearing voices you trust. “People listen and read for familiarity,” Tomlinson said. “It’s comforting to hear the familiar voices on WFAE and know they’re keeping us informed. I’m honored to be one of those voices.”

The quality of WFAE’s journalism didn’t suffer due to the pandemic. And, for the most part, neither did the sound quality — although a reporter’s spare bedroom isn’t the ideal place from which to broadcast.

Charlotte Talks host Mike Collins considers it among the station’s biggest

accomplishments since the start of the pandemic. “Completely shifting the way we operate behind the scenes without the listener knowing it was huge,” he said. “We didn’t miss a beat. This was a seamless transition, and it could have been a disaster.”

Our news staff didn’t have all the necessary equipment on hand at home. Some needed mics; some needed headphones, and then there was the special equipment needed for those who had to broadcast live from home. Thanks to listener funding and an emergency grant, the station was able to acquire \$20,000 worth of equipment. The pandemic made it necessary.

It’s proved to be a good investment since everyone is still — nearly two years into the pandemic — working from home.

“At this point, we’re putting more and better best practices into place because this is going to be here for a while,” said Wendy Herkey, executive producer of *Charlotte Talks*. As the delta variant became more of a challenge, she said, “We’re settling in with the idea that we’re going to be remote even longer than we’d expected.”

‘THE ESSENTIAL PROVIDER OF HARD LOCAL NEWS’

The pandemic has, in some ways, proven WFAE to be what its leadership, staff and board have always known it could be. “WFAE has solidified its role as the essential provider of hard local news for the Charlotte community,” CEO Joe O’Connor said. “Our commitment to doing the best journalism and hiring the best journalists has really driven it.”

Hiring the best is one thing. Keeping them is another. WFAE hasn’t furloughed or laid off a single staffer since the pandemic began, and O’Connor views that as a “remarkable accomplishment.”

The finance team looked at all options for funding the necessary move to remote work. Listener support was the main source, but a Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loan helped bridge the funding gap caused by significant drops in local business sponsorship and event revenue.

In addition to a global pandemic, 2020 brought something else. Using the lens of a journalist, O’Connor said, “COVID was already the biggest story of their careers. And then, on May 25, 2020, we witnessed the murder of George Floyd, which was an equally important story.”

In a year already marked by a contentious election and battle over voting rights, suddenly, the nation was facing another crisis. There was a national uprising happening in our city and in cities and small towns around the world. Day after day, night after night.

“Completely shifting the way we operate behind the scenes without the listener knowing it was huge. We didn’t miss a beat.”

Mike Collins

BREAKING NEWS

Civil unrest in Charlotte



Protestors kneel in uptown Charlotte. Credit: David Boraks / WFAE

Few could have guessed that a story would come along and be urgent enough to keep a global pandemic from being the lead story in every newscast. But then George Floyd was murdered by Minneapolis police officers, and a teenager caught it on her cell phone.

The revolution-in-the-middle-of-a-pandemic story seemed surreal. Suddenly, there was a second, critically important story to cover.

The protests demanded in-person coverage, despite the risks. And a lot of the supplies and gear reporters needed weren't immediately apparent.

"We took every precaution to ensure the safety of our journalists. We outfitted them with personal safety gear and new equipment," said EVP Ju-Don Marshall. "We may not have been in the office, but we needed to be on the streets with protesters, telling their stories."

The protests demanded attention. And they demanded change.

"We'd been dealing with the pandemic and reporting on the importance of not going out, of avoiding crowds," reporter Sarah Delia said. "Then suddenly these protests happen, and your brain is saying: Ignore the pandemic and the advice to stay home. You've got a job to do."

"I was very moved as a reporter," said David Boraks. "While covering the protests, there was a moment when the whole crowd knelt down at once in front of the Epicentre. And they remained on one knee for eight silent minutes — the amount of time the officer's knee was on Mr. Floyd's neck. In the silence, someone yelled 'Mama!' just as Mr. Floyd he had done as he was dying. Then someone else yelled, 'I can't breathe!' It was important for us to be there."

Board co-chair Nick Wharton, CEO of The Charlotte Area Fund, a nonprofit fighting poverty, likened Delia and her colleagues to first responders: "WFAE reporters have been like firefighters running toward danger. They have put themselves at risk to bring listeners the news they need."

"That was my first experience with tear gas," said Delia in discussing what she experienced while covering the protests in response to Floyd's murder.

"We had to turn and run," she explained. "But there's a whole crowd having to turn and run because of the police. Someone grabbed my backpack and pushed me. There was noise and confusion. Some protestors were throwing water bottles at the police. I was close to a firework that someone lit in their hand. You don't realize how loud flashbangs are. I let out a scream. I was sure I'd been hit."

"This was my first experience with tear gas ... We had to turn and run ... I let out a scream."

Sarah Delia



Then Charlotte Chief of Police Kerr Putney answers questions during protest. Credit: David Boraks | WFAE

“Covering the George Floyd protests gave us a front-row seat to history.”

Claire Donnelly

“WFAE reporters did a fabulous job in providing balanced coverage of the protests,” Wharton said. “They didn’t demonize the police force, but they helped listeners understand the history of structural racism in the U.S. They have been asking: Are our Black citizens really protected?”

PROVIDING CONTEXT

The news stories we never forget — those happenings that become cultural milestones — the Kennedy assassinations, the Challenger explosion, the Oklahoma City bombing, 9/11 — they always seem to happen out of the blue. But that’s never the case. Something — multiple somethings — lead to these indelible moments.

It’s a journalist’s job to give us the as-it’s-happening report. But a hallmark of public radio journalism is looking deeper. Finding out: What got us here? What were the signs everyone missed? Wharton called it “delving into issues that are inconvenient.”

In the case of the Black Lives Matter protests the Floyd murder ignited, it wasn’t just that particular killing of an unarmed black man that sparked national outrage. It was all those that came before. It was the all the rogue police officers who killed citizens and were never charged with a crime. Floyd was the tipping point. And these issues were compounded by the pandemic and political division.

Despite the very real risks, being there — in what surely felt like the fog of war — was important. It was vital and felt that way. Claire Donnelly said, “Covering the George Floyd protests gave us a front-row seat to history.”

“This was not just breaking news,” Joe O’Connor said. “There were centuries of background, and we needed to report that.”

And there was an appropriate order in which to do it. “We must hear first from communities of color,” said O’Connor.



Charlotte’s Black Lives Matter mural in June 2020, courtesy of Charlotte Star Room.

“We’ve got to be willing
to ask ourselves hard questions.
Is the only time we cover the
African-American community
when there’s a problem?”

Nick Wharon / Board Co-Chair

THE END OF INEQUITY?

And the case for diversity and inclusion

The George Floyd murder — and the other murders — forced us to ask what more we could do to address the systemic racism plaguing our communities. “It’s led to necessary soul searching. We’re determined to examine our business practices, dissect what we do, who we cover and how,” said WFAE’s former board chair Mark Ethridge. “This is work that’s vital — and its impact will be even longer-lasting than the pandemic.”



Artists paint the “Black Lives Matter” mural on Tryon Street in Uptown Charlotte.
Credit: Michael Falero | WFAE

The idea of diversity in coverage wasn’t novel for WFAE. “We’ve had a big push over the past four or five years to be sure we’re talking to the people affected and not just about the people affected,” said Ju-Don Marshall, WFAE’s EVP and chief content officer, as well as a 17-year veteran of *The Washington Post*’s newsroom. “Anyone who’s listened to us that long can see the difference in our reporting and also in our community outreach and engagement.”

That “big push” turned into a shove after George Floyd’s murder with the formation of a Race & Equity team.

“We realized that we must do something in response to this ... to report on these issues.” CEO Joe O’Connor said. “We are confident that we will quickly reach our \$1.2 million goal to fund the Race & Equity team for three years, but we commit to doing this work no matter what. With the board’s support, we will spend reserves to build this important team, if necessary.”

So, Marshall proposed creating a Race & Equity team — not just another desk. This team will influence everything we report on. While not all stories are specifically about race, there are aspects of race in almost every story. You can’t report on education, healthcare, the environment, politics or the economy without considering how race plays a role in those issues. The Race & Equity team will ensure we examine our coverage through this important lens.

WFAE has been intentional about diversity and inclusion awareness training. We’ve also looked at our supplier pipeline and are increasing the amount of business we do with African-American-owned businesses. We’ve reached out to others to identify organizations in which we could build effective business relationships.

Creating a diverse newsroom, covering diverse communities and ensuring that a diversity of thought is represented in the stories we tell has been on the agenda for a while. WFAE is taking an expansive view of what diversity means. Station leadership is working hard to diversify its audience.

“Diversity doesn’t mean you just increase the number of stories you do on certain communities. It means you’re doing stories that matter to communities of color.”

Alexandra Watts

COMMUNITY AS CO-AUTHOR

“This is a problem inherent in public radio,” said Marshall. “There’s not as much geographic or ethnic diversity as we’d like. So, we’re trying to get outside our normal networks. We’ve led a big effort to let the community be the co-author of some of our reporting. On our website, on radio and on social media, we’ve been asking: What do you want to hear from us? Our *FAQ City* podcast is based on listeners telling us what questions they want answered, but that opportunity is present throughout our website.”

The effort to diversify news coverage, the newsroom, content and listenership goes well beyond the basics.

In partnership with Report for America, WFAE hired journalists Dante Miller, Alexandra Watts and Laura Brache to report on under-covered issues and communities. Miller and Watts both worked to document the community’s news and information needs while embedded with the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library. They produced voters’ guides, virtual conversations and wrote everything from election stories to obituaries, capturing the stories of interesting Charlotteans. Brache reported — both in English and in Spanish — on immigration issues as part of a collaboration between WFAE and *La Noticia*.

Watts said, “Diversity doesn’t mean you just increase the number of stories you do on certain communities. It means you’re doing stories that matter to communities of color.”

To do that, you have to know those communities. You have to go into those communities and earn the trust of the people you hope to interview. In some of these communities, there is a deep mistrust of the establishment, which includes government and the media.

BUILDING TRUST WITH LISTENERS AND SOURCES

“There’s a reason Latinos — some of them undocumented — are willing to share their stories with us,” Brache said. “They know we’re going to tell them respectfully.”

“There are some organizations and newsrooms that talked the talk,” Watts said, adding that WFAE “walks the walk” in demonstrating its commitment to diversity, inclusion and respectful communication in day-to-day organizational matters as well as its news focus.

“When I brought up how I was feeling in a past newsroom, I was yelled at and told I was there to do a job,” Watts continued. “When I brought up how I was feeling here, I was listened to as a person. I didn’t have to censor my feelings.”



The Camino Health Center has served Charlotte, specifically focusing on the Latino community, for 18 years. Credit: Laura Brache | WFAE

REPORT FOR AMERICA PARTNERSHIP

Journalism's version of the Peace Corps



*WFAE/RFA reporter Gracyn Doctor interviews Deep Roots CPS farmers for a story she did on Black farmers and debt relief.
Credit: Kim Brattain Media*

In 2020, WFAE and partner organizations hired three Report For America journalists. RFA is a national service program that places emerging journalists in local news organizations and covers a portion of their salaries. RFA corps member Dante Miller calls the program “the journalism version of the Peace Corps or AmeriCorps.”

Miller was part of the first wave of RFA journalists to join WFAE’s newsroom in May, along with Alexandra “Alex” Watts and Laura Brache.

WFAE shared Brache with *La Noticia*, a local Spanish-language newspaper. Her stories appeared in English and Spanish.

A survey WFAE and the public library distributed sought to find what communities of color wanted in their news and in public forums. In early 2020, WFAE held a virtual community conversation about mental health in the Black community — a direct outcome of the survey results.

“We looked at how COVID has affected people’s mental health, specifically in the Black community,” Miller said. “There was a huge — there still is — stigma in the Black community about mental health issues.”

Watts, who holds a bachelor’s and a master of mass communication degree from the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication and has worked with Mississippi Public Broadcasting and Arizona PBS, covered the Black Lives Matter protests and heard all the racist rhetoric.

She said, “As journalists, we’re going to deal with people we wouldn’t choose to deal with in our personal lives. To come back to a supportive newsroom like we have here makes all the difference.”

The RFA corps members’ work

highlighted the need for journalism that reflected the concerns of an increasingly diverse Charlotte. That’s where WFAE’s Race and Equity team, established at the end of FY21, comes in — with help from current RFA reporters Gracyn Doctor and Maria Ramirez Uribe.

Doctor began her new role by asking what stories mattered to listeners who may have felt underserved by news organizations.

“I started by actually getting out into the community and finding out what we’re lacking in our coverage,” she said. “What are ways that we can cover the community better? What are things that need to be covered that we aren’t covering?”

Doctor also shared a deeply personal story with listeners. In a May 2021 *Still Here* podcast episode, she spoke of her grief after her mother, the Rev. DePayne Middleton-Doctor, was among nine people murdered in 2015 at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. She’s leaned on her aunt, her “favorite person” in the years since. When her aunt died unexpectedly after a routine medical procedure, Doctor felt the weight of her mom’s loss all over again. And she learned that grieving two big losses during a pandemic comes with added challenges.

Her work has helped sustain her, and a new kind of therapy for her — equine therapy — is bringing a measure of peace.

Miller and Watts said that, in 2020, what people wanted was more information on political candidates and where and how to vote. WFAE responded with expanded political coverage and voters’ guides.



WFAE/RFA reporter Maria Ramirez Uribe. Credit: Kim Brattain Media

“I started by actually getting out into the community and finding out what we’re lacking in our coverage.”

Gracyn Doctor

“WFAE is unique in its genuine commitment to the work that we’re doing now. It’s no small feat that a newsroom is putting a lot of resources into creating this team.”

Maria Ramirez Uribe

Given how COVID changed the world of work, survey respondents said they wanted community conversations on how to start a business.

Ramirez Uribe felt that collaboration within the newsroom helped, too. “WFAE is unique in its genuine commitment to the work that we’re doing now,” she said. “I think it’s no small feat that a newsroom is putting a lot of resources into creating this team.”

“People thanked us profusely for our voters’ guides,” said EVP Ju-Don Marshall. “That used to be the exclusive domain of newspapers, but it’s now a part of our push to be a community resource.”

“Finding out where the presidential candidates stand on issues is easy,” she continued, “but what about the soil and water conservation district? A lot of people don’t even understand what that is. We think understanding those basic functions of local government is fundamental to having a healthy community and strong democracy.”

HIGH COST OF COVID-19

Maria Ramirez Uribe and Gracy Doctor first arrived at WFAE as reporting fellows covering the impact of the pandemic on Black and Latino communities in Charlotte.

The result was *The High Cost of COVID-19*, a series that examines the staggering financial toll of the virus on Black and Latino communities throughout Charlotte. It was produced in collaboration with the *Charlotte Ledger*, *Q City Metro* and *La Noticia* and funded by grants from Facebook, the N.C. Local News Lab

Fund and Google, as well as gifts from WFAE members.

“I think it was a series that filled a gap in coverage ... not just for WFAE, but for Charlotte,” said Ramirez Uribe, who covered the worldwide impact of COVID-19 as a freelance researcher for CNN’s international desk during the summer of 2020.

Doctor spoke about how the series highlighted everyday challenges that have been made worse by the pandemic, like in her story about the “impossible situation” of single parenting during COVID.

“It was very interesting – but not surprising – the many different ways that Black and brown people were impacted by the pandemic,” she said, “and how the pandemic can make a situation that may not have been so bad before almost intolerable.”

Although COVID-19 is a relatively new problem, Ramirez Uribe also felt the pandemic exposed systemic problems.

“A lot of the issues presented for Black and Latino communities in terms of the economic impact of COVID-19 are really issues and barriers and obstacles these communities have been facing for decades, if not longer,” she said.

Some of the stories showed moments of joy, where people successfully reinvented their businesses or managed to get much-needed loans to keep their organizations afloat. Those stories are an important part of the series, too.

“In covering the Latino community, ‘resiliency’ kept coming up,” said Ramirez Uribe. She kept hearing about people unwilling to give in.

‘Bloody, but unbowed’

“Resiliency doesn’t always mean someone started a new business or that life is perfect and pretty. Resiliency can mean they’re getting out of bed in the morning, and that’s success for them.”

Sarah Delia

“We focus on people who have been through something during the pandemic and how they’ve shown resiliency,” said Sarah Delia of her *Still Here* series, which launched in March 2021.

It airs on *Morning Edition*, *All Things Considered*, and “also lives in a podcast,” she explained. The series gives listeners “a chance to get to know people better, to spend a little more time with interview subjects than they would otherwise,” she added. “The pieces are longer than a traditional radio piece — usually eight-and-a-half minutes — and that’s because we’re telling someone’s deeply personal story.”

We’re all living through a pandemic and the many challenges it presents. But some of our neighbors have something on top of the pandemic — family members with a terminal illness, job loss, long-haul COVID. Delia looks at how tough people can be when they’re up against seemingly insurmountable odds.

To be resilient, we have to first go through an ordeal, a crisis, a tragedy. Being called resilient is a badge of honor — but it comes with a cost.

“Resiliency doesn’t always mean someone started a new business or that life is perfect and pretty,” Delia said. “Resiliency can mean they’re getting out of bed in the morning, and that’s success for them.”



William McNeely spoke with WFAE’s Sarah Delia about how he survived a double lung transplant in 2019 and then COVID-19 in 2021. Image courtesy of William McNeely.

**OUT OF THE NIGHT THAT COVERS ME
BLACK AS THE PIT FROM POLE TO POLE,
I THANK WHATEVER GODS MAY BE
FOR MY UNCONQUERABLE SOUL.**

**IN THE FELL CLUTCH OF CIRCUMSTANCE,
I HAVE NOT WINCED NOR CRIED ALOUD.
UNDER THE BLUDGEONINGS OF CHANCE
MY HEAD IS BLOODY, BUT UNBOWED.**

**BEYOND THIS PLACE OF WRATH AND TEARS
LOOMS BUT THE HORROR OF THE SHADE,
AND YET THE MENACE OF THE YEARS
FINDS, AND SHALL FIND, ME UNAFRAID.**

**IT MATTERS NOT HOW STRAIT THE GATE,
HOW CHARGED WITH PUNISHMENTS THE SCROLL,
I AM THE MASTER OF MY FATE:
I AM THE CAPTAIN OF MY SOUL**

Invictus / William Ernest Henley

“We’ve interviewed people who have lost loved ones to COVID and then turned that loss into something meaningful for them. We’ve interviewed people who have had COVID and are still feeling the long-term effects of it. We’ve interviewed people who have lost businesses and are struggling to find their identity in the wake of that loss.”

“Resiliency looks and feels different from person to person,” Delia continued. “And I think the series reflects that. There are some similarities in our struggles, but they are uniquely our own sometimes, too.”

Delia interviewed a listener, Chris Hawkins of Concord, who had connected with her on Facebook in 2020. “He has two sons, both of whom have Batten disease, a rare, hereditary disorder of the nervous system,” Delia said. “With Batten disease, you know you are going to die young. It ages you quickly. You can go blind; you can be 16 and have dementia. One of Chris’ sons passed away during the pandemic, and he was very open and vulnerable and shared a lot about that on Facebook. I reached out to him because I thought: *This* is someone who’s really going through something.”

“He told me he felt like he was either neglecting his job or neglecting his family,” she continued. “He went on short-term disability and then that turned into long-term disability. And going back to work is not possible right now. It’s definitely taken a toll on his mental and physical health.”

“I think you can be really resilient and not feel resilient at all,” she concluded. “Chris said, ‘I don’t feel very strong, but you can talk to me if you want to.’”

Hopkins and so many others are like the Everyman hero of the William Ernest Henley poem, *Invictus*. “In the fell clutch of circumstance/I have not winced nor cried aloud./Under the bludgeonings of chance/My head is bloody, but unbowed.”

Delia has been moved by the people she’s met through the series. “I’m constantly impressed by the resiliency so many people have,” she said. “It is amazing to see what people overcome and push through. I’m constantly blown away by how vulnerable people will be with me. And I find that to be a great honor that people trust me with telling their really hard stories.”

It takes a deft touch to interview a trauma survivor. Delia, who has honed her craft as host of acclaimed WFAE podcasts *She Says* and *The List* will tell her interview subjects in advance: “My intent is not to make you cry, but you might have an emotional response, and that’s totally OK. Let me know if there’s something I ask you that you’re not comfortable with.”

Radio stories require sound beyond just that of the subject’s voice. “I’ve had to find ways to ask people for sound to help me create themes and stories,” Delia said. “In the first episode, we shared a heartbreaking story about a woman whose fiancé passed away from COVID at the start of the pandemic — before they could get married. One of the pieces of audio she ended up giving me was a voicemail he’d left her. She had saved them and listened to them every day.”

To be resilient, we have to first go through an ordeal, a crisis, a tragedy. Being called resilient is a badge of honor — but it comes with a cost.



Brothers Jeremy (left) and Brandon (right) Hawkins in June of 2019. Image courtesy of Chris Hawkins / Olga Mohr Photography

THE LIST AND SOCIAL DISTANCING

Speaking truth to power and keeping people connected

Reporter and podcast host Sarah Delia asks people to relive deeply personal and painful moments so she can share them with a wide audience.

“I’ve learned to sit with someone in their trauma — to share a sometimes-uncomfortable space,” she said. “I ask people to relive horrible things that have happened to them. I had to understand the science of PTSD, to know what it is to be triggered. I never want to do an interview with someone and have them feel *worse* afterward. Part of my responsibility as a journalist is to not add to their trauma while telling their story accurately.”



Illustration for *The List* by Greg Harris

Delia hosted *She Says*, a widely acclaimed, award-winning podcast dealing with surviving sexual assault and *The List*, a four-episode series about the personal impacts of the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic church’s Charlotte archdiocese.

It was another success for Delia and WFAE. *The List* ranked first in two categories — investigative reporting

and podcasting — in the 2020 regional Edward R. Murrow awards. And former board chair Mark Ethridge is a fan. “I like investigative reports like *The List*,” he said. “I like stories that uncover things people want covered up.”

Delia understood that listeners have needed to narrow their focus. People needed to know how to stay safe — and how to combat isolation and loneliness. Her idea to start the *Social Distancing* series came from “wanting to remind people: You’re not alone.”

“Some stories from the *Social Distancing* series were very emotional,” Delia said. For instance, she interviewed Jay Thomas, whose wife, Paige, had recently died from cancer. When it became clear she had just weeks to live, her family could have admitted her to the hospital (and not been able to see her due to COVID restrictions) or bring her home.

“They brought her home and spent the last two weeks of her life with her,” Delia said. “They got to say goodbye in person.”

You have to be deft to do what Delia does. “To talk to someone in the middle of their grieving — you have to give them space,” she said. “I’m used to having these difficult conversations with people in person, where I can smile or nod to show empathy. I can’t do that on the phone.”



Sarah Delia, host of *The List* and *Social Distancing*. Credit: Logan Cyrus

“I like stories that uncover things people want covered up.”

Mark Ethridge

A candid conversation on race

“It was powerful.
Many Black
listeners said it
was cathartic.”

Ju-Don Marshall

George Floyd’s murder and the protests that followed deserved in-depth analysis. So, WFAE hosted an hour-long roundtable discussion to focus on race relations in Charlotte.

Chief Content Officer Ju-Don Marshall knew just the right person to lead the conversation: Mary C. Curtis, an award-winning, national correspondent who lives in Charlotte. “We brought Mary in to have a different kind of conversation to address the grief and anger the community was experiencing,” Marshall said.

“We envisioned it as an intimate conversation, like people sitting in a living room and talking,” Marshall said of the broadcast. “It was powerful. Many Black listeners said it was cathartic. Other listeners said they gained perspective.”

Curtis, who is also a speaker and columnist for *Roll Call*, hosted the discussion alongside four other Black Charlotteans, each with a distinct point of view. Curtis was joined by Tracey Benson, author and assistant professor of educational leadership at UNC Charlotte; Justin Perry, owner/therapist at Perry Counseling Healing and Recovery; Tonya Jameson, political consultant and former *Charlotte Observer* reporter; and Leondra Garrett, longtime community advocate.

It’s this kind of thought-provoking programming that WFAE is known for. It’s this kind of programming that led CEO Joe O’Connor to say, “The reason people trust us is: We’re empathetic. We’re not just about the mind; we’re about the heart.”



Mary C. Curtis, an award-winning, national correspondent was brought in to lead the Black Charlotteans conversation. Credit: Tom Williams | Roll Call

REBUILDING CHARLOTTE

What the pandemic is teaching us



People experiencing homelessness live under a Charlotte highway overpass. Credit: Jesse Steinmetz | WFAE

“We planned on running this through 2021,” producer Greg Collard said of *Rebuilding Charlotte*, a series sponsored by Lowe’s. That was when it looked like COVID would be on its way out and the rebuilding — of the economy, of the arts scene, of our lives — could begin. Alas.

“That changed with the delta variant,” he continued. “The language we were using to promote it was ‘recovery from the pandemic,’ but that sounds kind of silly to say that now. So, we’re looking at life and what we’ve learned from the pandemic.”

You could say Collard and team *pivoted ...* if you weren’t so tired of hearing that word.

- Ann Doss Helms investigated children who’ve disappeared from Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. They weren’t showing up to Zoom classes, and no one was answering the phone at home. These “missing students” have fallen off everyone’s radar.
- Marshall Terry looked into the plights of both landlords and renters during these times when the economy is punishing both.
- The shortage of respiratory therapists in the area was the subject of a Claire Donnelly report.

But occasionally, there was a feel-good story to share about pandemic life. Sonja Chisolm founded Gracious Hands Transitional Housing in Charlotte in 2015, Collard said. It’s transi-

tional housing for women and children experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness and has grown in the last couple of years as the need has grown. The group provides temporary housing for homeless women and their children and helps them graduate to their own stable housing.

David Boraks began covering Gracious Hands in 2018. “Sonja Chisolm basically built this from scratch with her own money because she saw the need,” he said. It’s more than housing, Boraks said, “She offers training and support for residents. She encourages them — and requires them — to do job interviews and to get jobs and ultimately to contribute to the cost of the house where they live.”

When Boraks first met Chisolm, her group was in a rental house in west Charlotte. There were problems with the landlord, and she was being threatened with eviction. A listener in Davidson heard Boraks’ report, looked into Gracious Hands, liked what she saw and bought them a house in north Charlotte. That listener has since bought the organization a second house, as well.

A Charlotte couple heard Boraks’ report and also got involved with Gracious Hands. “They made a substantial donation in hopes of adding more houses and improving the level of support Gracious Hands offers,” he said. “These donors were moved to action after hearing the story on WFAE. I’ve done other stories that have had an impact, but never at this level. It’s really heartwarming.”



Sonja Chisolm is the founder and director of Gracious Hands Transitional Housing in Charlotte. Credit: David Boraks | WFAE

Coverage:
Reports from
WFAE's
news beats

HEALTH COVERAGE

Reporting on a plague

In some ways, 2021 seemed like 2020: *The Sequel*.

COVID-19 was rampant again. Hospitals and ICUs were filling up.

But Joe O'Connor sees 2020 and 2021 as distinctly different years. "I don't think you can underestimate the positive effects of having several effective vaccines in record time," he said. "That *has* to be different from a time you didn't know when the vaccine was going to arrive. There's been a huge injection of hope. An effective vaccination was a game changer, no matter some people's reluctance to take it."

"And that gets back to reliable news being the antidote to the increasing wave of misinformation and disinformation," he continued. "Misinformation causes people to make choices that are against their own well-being, their family's well-being and the community's well-being."



A funeral home director prepares for the funeral of a man who died from COVID-19.
Credit: Octavio Jones / Stringer

“Coronavirus became everybody’s beat ... It’s more than a health story. It’s caused people to lose their jobs, their homes. We have all pulled together to tackle different angles of this story.”

Claire Donnelly

“Coronavirus became *everybody’s* beat,” said Claire Donnelly, WFAE’s health care reporter. “There is no aspect of our lives that has not been impacted by COVID-19. It’s more than a health story. It’s caused people to lose their jobs, their homes. We have all pulled together to tackle different angles of this story.”

Health care, always an important beat, became essential. Keeping current on the latest precautions being recommended could save your life or that of someone you love.

“It’s been kind of like riding a bull,” said Donnelly of covering a pandemic. “You need to bring listeners along with you and keep their trust in you as well, and it’s a lot of responsibility.”

COVID-19 is an ongoing story. But it began as breaking news. There was not much lead time to prepare to cover it. For a couple of months, it seemed like a problem that might remain limited to a country on the other side of the world.

Then, swiftly, it was a threat to us.

While reporters were getting up to speed on the coronavirus, station management was working on how to keep them safe at such a precarious time. “Public health, station health and employee health are always paramount to me,” said O’Connor. “When we realized how much the pandemic was going to impact operations, we created a safety committee. No one can do any reporting if they’re not safe.”

One of the novel things that WFAE was to take on was the work of

answering users’ individual questions. Covering COVID gave reporters the opportunity to connect more closely with listeners. Reporters didn’t want to just present the news. They wanted to address what the public wanted to know. “Nick [de la Canal] and I pivoted to a Q&A format for *FAQ City* because there were so many questions from the public,” Donnelly said. “Does heat kill the virus? ‘How can I boost my immune system?’ ‘Can I walk my dog while we’re under the stay-at-home order?’ Everyone was scrambling for information.”



Nurse Elisa Valeriano prepares before entering to the rooms with COVID-19 patients. Credit: Carlos Alvarez / Stringer

“What’s been particularly challenging, and sometimes invigorating, about this beat, is that we as reporters don’t necessarily learn things any more quickly than then the scientific experts,” Donnelly said. “Because this is a new thing. That made it a unique challenge, because a lot of times I’m asking questions, and it’s too new for the officials to know or the infrastructure isn’t in place to track that stuff. I would say that’s the scariest part is that we all are sort of learning about things at the same time.”

PUBLIC EDUCATION COVERAGE

“Nothing about us without us”



Students arriving for the return of in-person school to temperature checks and health screenings. Credit: Kate Medley | For WUNC

Scores of WFAE listeners have relied on and praised Ann Doss Helms' work as they navigated changing school plans these past two years. Helms is asking tough questions, demanding accountability, pointing out disparities when she sees them.

And she sees them often.

"Education has always been emotional and sensitive and political," she said. "But the level of that has just ramped up during COVID."

"The racial disparity in the education system has widened," Helms continued. "Finding students who have fallen through the cracks is getting tougher. For our reporting to be accurate, we've needed to adopt the 'Nothing about us without us' idea. You don't do a story on poor kids by talking to white administrators in an office. You talk to low-income families to get their take."

That kind of reporting takes time. "People who are shut out of the system don't respond to social media or phone calls," she said. "You may have to go through social service channels to reach them. It's hard; there's a lot of distrust of the media."

But Helms is good at what she does. The best, in fact, according to CEO Joe O'Connor: "We have the best education reporter of our generation in our region in Ann Doss Helms. Parents, administrators, as well as teachers are hanging on her every word."

Many consider her *the* authority. "Because I've been doing this for so long," she said, "a lot of people will come to me when they can't get the answers from their school districts. Sometimes, it's micro-level stuff I can't answer, but I also try to help if I can."

"I'm never really off the clock," she said. "Social media makes you always available. I don't mind; most of my good story ideas come from listeners." She has more than 7,500 Twitter followers she's accountable to.

Her reporting resonates with listeners.

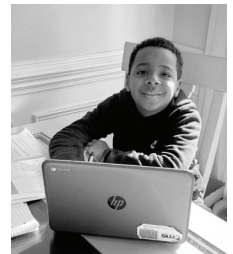
After doing a three-part series focused on how CMS's Oakdale Elementary School was faring during the pandemic, Helms got a thank-you note from a teacher she had shadowed. The note thanked Helms "for being respectful and honest" with her report. Romona Matthews, a second-grade teacher, began her email with the subject line, "Awesome Job!"

"Several times as I read ... the document, I felt sorry for myself and got a little choked up realizing how much teachers do. When we are in the thick of things, we do what is necessary to achieve our goal... The way you presented what I shared with you was amazing."

"It is my hope that someone from the district will view all three parts your report carefully and really take into consideration all that we do to help our scholars and families ..."

"You don't do a story on poor kids by talking to white administrators in an office. You talk to low-income families to get their take."

Ann Doss Helms



Oakdale third grader Treyson Rodriguez spent most of the year learning from home. Credit: Ann Doss Helms | WFAE

Helms asked Oakdale’s principal if she could embed herself in a classroom. She wanted more than she could get from a phone interview. She wanted to experience what the pandemic was doing to teachers, students, administrators and parents — and bring her listeners along.

Oakdale was a good place to go. “It’s considered a high-poverty school with a lot of working parents with hourly jobs, who were highly exposed to the coronavirus often,” she said.

Helms goes where the story is. At news conferences, Helms is not just listening, recording, asking questions and taking notes. She’s got to be on Twitter, too: “People will tweet me and say: ‘Ask this ...’ It’s a highly interactive framework.”

RACE AND EDUCATION

Helms’ education beat is a behemoth. But she’s expanded it further by going beyond what’s expected. Says Helms: “I spend a lot of time thinking about race in America as it relates to the education system.”

She’ll question the prevailing wisdom — and in so doing, force others to, as well. “We’ve had this idea that public education is the great equalizer,” she said. “And because of the pandemic, there’s a realization that it is not. It used to be a big deal if snow closed schools for a day or two. Some sources say the pandemic could set at-risk students back for a *generation*.”

“Tens of thousands of parents are hanging on Ann’s every word,” said Joe O’Connor, “and not just with the latest about schools in terms of attendance and masking and remote learning but also for analysis of what the challenges were.” She’s talking to and reaching agonized parents, teachers and administrators and never forgetting to look at the cost to children of color.

Race shows up in education in unexpected ways. And when it does, Helms is there.

“If you had asked me to predict what was going to be one of the hottest topics in education in the coming year — and it was multiple choice and ‘history curriculum’ was one of those choices — I wouldn’t have even looked at that,” she said. “I would’ve thought no way this could become a huge political hot button.”

Yet history curriculum has become controversial.

Helms knows every parent of a school-age child is concerned about education, and she means to deliver accurate reporting. “Accountability must be driven by data,” said Helms. “I love data. I’m the person who says, ‘I just got this great Excel spreadsheet,’ and I’m not being sarcastic.”

Helms cares about variety in her reporting. She wants to bring listeners not just the news they need — but stories that might be fun to hear. A break from the bad news.

“I get really excited when I can do a good audio story,” she said. “The education beat involves a lot of policy, a lot of talking. I loved getting to go to North Mecklenburg High School’s auto shop. All the clanks and clunks and welding torch and sputtering ... those are the fun ones to me. It’s exciting to feel like this is a radio report that wouldn’t have worked as a print story.”



Second-graders at Huntersville Elementary in March 2020, before schools closed. Credit: Ann Doss Helms / WFAE

“We’ve had this idea that public education is the great equalizer. Because of the pandemic, there’s a realization that it is not.”

Ann Doss Helms / Education Reporter

ENVIRONMENTAL COVERAGE

“The facts are going to win out”

Scientists say climate change is the biggest threat our planet has ever faced. And the frequency and severity of hurricanes and floods, combined with wildfires on the west coast that get more destructive each year, may eventually convince skeptics it’s real.

“Climate change is no longer a distant worry for us,” said David Boraks, the station’s environmental reporter whose beat was refined this summer to focus exclusively on climate change, thanks to grants from the One Earth and Salamander Funds.



Two large domes at the Port of Wilmington store wood pellets manufactured in North Carolina before they are shipped to Europe to be burned as energy. Credit: David Boraks | WFAE

Boraks added, “It’s already changing our lives in so many different ways. Expanding the coverage is designed to raise awareness about it and make sure people understand those impacts that are happening right now.”

And not just right now – but right here. “Climate change is a global issue,” Boraks said, “And a lot of the coverage we’ve seen in recent years has been at the global and national

level. We have reports coming out of the UN, from Washington — and it’s easy for people to see climate change as something happening somewhere else. Our funders and I believe that to get more people to understand what’s going on with climate change, we need to make it a local issue. So, the goal of this beat is to localize this issue.”

The goal of Boraks’ beat is to provide people with information that will help them make changes in their own lives. People are experiencing “climate anxiety,” in part because they’re at a loss about what to do. Boraks speaks directly to them.

“My newsletter has a regular series of profiles of organizations that people could join,” Boraks said. “There’s everything from recycling to what you drive to how you spend your time dealing with it. We really hope to give people ideas for how they can address climate change in whatever way works for them.”

“We also hope they’ll make decisions about things in their lives based on what we cover. We’ve been looking at the evolution of the electric vehicle market. Hopefully, through our reporting, we can help people understand and make decisions when the time is right for them to make the shift. A number of automakers are already announcing that they’ll no longer make gas-powered vehicles, so people need to get comfortable with.”

Former board chair Mark Ethridge,



The Metrolina Warehouse | Carolina Asbestos factory in Davidson. Credit: David Boraks | WFAE

who calls Boraks “the area’s premier environmental reporter,” said, “You can say you don’t believe that climate change is real, but ultimately the facts are going to win out.”

They may be starting to. Washington has returned to a science-based approach to the environment. “The change of administration has changed the tenor of statements out of the White House and actions in the executive branch,” Boraks said. We’re seeing some of the things that were undone or rejected previously coming back — our renewed commitment to the Paris Climate Accords, for example.”

“There are goals in Paris Climate Agreement to try and limit temperature increase by 1½ to 2 degrees,” he continued. “The idea is: If we take actions to do that, then we can prevent global warming and climate change from impacting us in more serious ways.”

Environmental coverage on WFAE expanded in 2020, thanks in part to environmental fellow Michael Falero, who joined WFAE in a position funded by The Blumenthal Foundation as well as board member Paul Freestone and his wife, Holly.

WFAE not only expanded its regular environmental coverage, it also was able to produce more in-depth reporting on environmental issues. Boraks was able to focus on an environmental justice story in his own backyard. He’s been reporting on

asbestos contamination in Davidson’s historically Black west side since the mid-2000s. In 2021, he produced a three-part, multi-channel series, *Asbestos Town*, along with a town hall and one-hour radio special.

The virtual town hall included an expert on asbestos-related diseases, a developer who’s considering redeveloping the old asbestos mill and a representative from the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality. “The town hall, the stories and the special did provoke a lot of discussion in Davidson,” Boraks said. “I think the most common thing I heard was from people who said they never knew this existed.

“Number two, I heard from people who’ve lived in Davidson for a long time that they were really pleased that somebody was paying attention to this problem they’ve known about since they were kids ... There are mixed feelings about redeveloping this old property, among the African-American community, because they still have pain from the family members they’ve lost to asbestos-related disease. And they’re also concerned about gentrification of their neighborhood. As a result of our reporting, the town is taking a closer look at it. The mayor said, during our public forum, that this is a critical issue facing the town. Things are moving forward to get a cleanup to happen there.”

“I have an abiding faith that facts and truth matter. You can say you don’t believe that climate change is real, but ultimately the facts are going to win out.”

Mark Ethridge

POLITICAL AND GOVERNMENT COVERAGE

Helping the public stay informed

“We don’t take money from politicians. Public radio’s sole role is to shine the spotlight of truth on whatever situation we’re reporting.”

Mark Ethridge

Listeners who want fair, factual, balanced political coverage, often turn to public radio first.

It’s neither blue nor red. It’s purple.

NPR has no reason to advocate for one agenda or party, said former board chair Mark Ethridge. “We don’t take money from politicians. Public radio’s sole role is to shine the spotlight of truth on whatever situation we’re reporting.”

While some public radio stations get state or local government support, WFAE receives no funding from the city or from North or South Carolina.

Said Ethridge: “If you looked at a continuum of news sources — with MSNBC on the left and Fox News on the right — WFAE and NPR would be in the middle.”

The middle is a good place for a journalist covering politics. “Covering all sides of the story is what we do,” said Steve Harrison, who covered city government for *The Charlotte Observer* for a decade before joining WFAE. But this has been his beat for much longer — 26 years.

As wild as the 2020 presidential election was, Harrison has seen wilder. When he was at *The Miami Herald*, he covered the recount after the 2000 Bush/Gore campaign — the “hanging-chad election.” These past two years have brought a pandemic, an energized civil rights movement, a wildly contentious presidential election, unfounded charges of election fraud, recounts and *re-recounts*.

Politics is always closely watched. But during the early days of COVID, federal, state and local governments were holding *daily* press briefings. “COVID forced our local elected officials to have to make a lot of big decisions,” Harrison said. “It’s my job to ensure that what they were saying was accurate — to hold them accountable.”

He did. “CMS formed a medical advisory team,” he continued, “and they held their first meeting in private, which is against the law.”

DON'T TRUST; VERIFY

Harrison takes nothing at face value. He’s not hoping for a “gotcha” moment; he’s verifying that the information he gets from official sources is correct.

“I think it’s very important to call [elected officials] out, to challenge everything they say,” he said. “I go to tremendous lengths to expose lies and deception when I see them. But I don’t like when the media is unanimously in lockstep and decides to dismiss certain views or thoughts.”

“A good example was — if you go back to the fall of 2020 and winter of 2021, when people talked about the coronavirus escaping from a lab,” he said. “The mainstream media, public radio, major newspapers would quickly dismiss that concept as ridiculous and possibly racist. And then you fast forward a few months later, and President Biden is announcing that he wants a deeper investigation into the roots of the coronavirus.”

“What can look like misinformation and deception in one time can, months later, look completely different,” he concluded. “I’m never a fan of the pack mentality and pack journalism.”

Harrison’s reports are crucial listening, especially in an election year. WFAE helps voters make informed decisions.

A partnership between WFAE and Votebeat, a nonpartisan reporting project covering local election integrity and voting access, led to enhanced coverage of local elections — the issues and the candidates. Michael Falero and Coleen Harry were assigned to the election beat and helped bring clarity to political races that matter — but too often get crowded out due to coverage of national and state-wide races.

“There were a lot of changes to the mail-in ballot,” said news director Greg Collard. “And the U.S. Postal Service played a big role in the election last year. One of our first Votebeat stories involved going to Bladen County, and seeing how the mail-in voting was happening.”

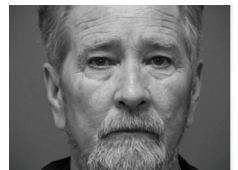
Bladen County is where Leslie McCrae Dowless Jr. was accused of illegal possession of absentee ballots, conspiracy and obstruction of justice. The N.C. State Board of Elections tossed out the results of the 2018 9th District U.S. congressional election after evidence was uncovered that Dowless led an operation that illegally collected and tampered with absentee ballots in Mark Harris’ race against Dan McCready.

“We geeked out on all of this,” Collard said of WFAE’s election coverage, which included reporting on the new COVID-era curbside voting, interviewing precinct workers and producing a voters’ guide to local races. “People love our voters’ guide,” Collard said. “It’s a compilation of all the candidates’ views on all the local races — city council, school board, soil and water. And it goes beyond Mecklenburg County to include a number of surrounding counties. It’s a great service to our audience.”



North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper speaks at a COVID-19 press conference.

Credit: N.C. Department Of Public Safety | Flickr



GOP operative Leslie McCrae Dowless Jr. was arrested in February 2017 and charged with illegal ballot handling and obstruction of justice.

“I’ve never worked harder ...
It’s reenergized me as a reporter.”

Steve Harrison / Political Reporter

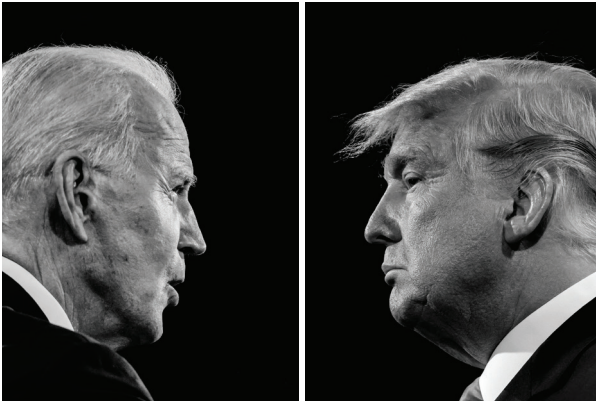
A POLARIZED POPULACE

Harrison said he looks at his job as a political reporter the same way he always has — even though the times have changed in recent years and getting to candidates isn't as easy as it once was.

“There's less access sometimes now to candidates than there used to be,” he said. “All the candidates used to want to engage and talk and now, the media has become so polarized that you'll have some races where some candidates decide not to talk. They don't need to speak to a newspaper or public radio because they'll get out their message through social media and their friendly media channels. That makes it harder to do my job. But you just keep pushing.”

“It's especially important for me to talk to conservatives and Republicans ... The station will treat them fairly.”

Steve Harrison



Joe Biden and Donald Trump. Credit: Jim Bourg / Getty Images

And he's pushing to get commentary from all sides. “It's especially important for me to talk to conservatives and Republicans,” he said. “And that's sometimes hard working for public radio. You just have to let your work speak for itself, and you have to keep badgering people, telling them it's in their best interest to talk, and I will treat them fairly. The station will treat them fairly.”

The next big story Harrison is following isn't as headline-generating as the Trump/Biden race — but it's significant. “We'll be drawing new maps in North Carolina and across the country since the census came out,” he said. “That's going to be a very important story, but it's sometimes hard for people to follow because it's kind of a slow-moving process. But it's also really important. It's difficult to try and keep the public engaged.”

Harrison will undoubtedly find a way.

CHARLOTTE TALKS

The ‘talk show of record for Charlotte’

For *Charlotte Talks* host Mike Collins, the silver lining of the pandemic was his home studio. “I was always late getting to the studio before,” he joked. “Now, I just walk upstairs.”

But it wasn’t all rosy. “Every lawn service in my neighborhood gets to work at 9 a.m.,” he joked. “As soon as we’re on the air, I can hear the leaf blowers.” (*Charlotte Talks* airs live weekdays at 9 a.m., and there’s a repeat broadcast each weeknight at 7 p.m.)

Collins’ wit has helped make him a mainstay in local media for more than 35 years. But listeners also appreciate his willingness to ask questions people would rather not answer.



Mike Collins, host of *Charlotte Talks*.
Credit: Jeff Cravotta Photography

Charlotte Talks pivoted when the virus hit, and not just in setting up home studios for Collins. The diversity of coverage — from politics to opera, from literature to race relations — has always been a hallmark of the show. But in 2020, it was (nearly) all COVID, all the time.

That’s what listeners needed. The topics on *Charlotte Talks* are driven by what the public is interested in. Long-time *Charlotte Talks* executive producer Wendy Herkey said, “We’re always asking: How will this benefit listeners?”

One benefit is providing in-depth political coverage — and not just in election years. “Since January 2020 up until the present, almost every Monday, we’ve had some sort of political component to the show,” Herkey said. “Some of those shows broke down the down-ballot races, some were issues-related. Since the election, we’ve covered the insurrection, the inauguration and Biden’s first year in office. I think it’s all been a really important service to our listeners.”

“We are the talk show of record for Charlotte now,” Collins said. “We’ve gotten there by focusing on the things listeners want to know.” Listener support fuels that focus.

Anything pandemic related was (and is) need-to-know-now information. *Charlotte Talks* producer Erin Kever said, “I think the most important coverage we did was provide in-depth information of what was happening with the pandemic. Early on, we were all trying to make sense of what was going on, and I think it was really valuable to have a live, one-hour show dedicated to talking to local health officials ... to keep up with the many changing guidelines and mandates.”

“Things were changing so quickly,” Kever continued. “And a lot of us felt so isolated. To be able to hear familiar voices, like Mike’s, was a comfort. We helped make sense of what we were all collectively experiencing. Some of the most valuable shows are those that provide practical, essential information for people’s everyday lives. And that’s absolutely what we did during the pandemic.”

**CHARLOTTE
TALKS**
WITH MIKE COLLINS

“Some of the most valuable shows are those that provide practical, essential information for people’s everyday lives. And that’s absolutely what we did during the pandemic.”

Erin Kever

“COVID ran everything in 2020,” Collins said. “Probably 85 to 90% of our shows had something to do with COVID. Education stories related back to COVID. Politics related to COVID. We tried to give listeners a break by doing a home decorating segment, and guess what? People are redecorating and remodeling now *because of COVID.*”

Collins can bring levity to even the most serious topics, which is part of his appeal.

Collins’ show, which debuted in 1998, has become essential listening. The hour-long format allows for in-depth coverage listeners can’t find elsewhere. Referring to Collins’ monthly sit-downs with Charlotte Mayor Vi Lyles, Mark Ethridge asked rhetorically, “Where else in journalism can you get an hour-long interview with the mayor other than on *Charlotte Talks?*”

Lyles isn’t the only mayor who gets time on *Charlotte Talks*. “We’re hosting the mayors of cities around the listening area and talking about

issues important to them and their communities,” Herkey said.

“One thing we really pride ourselves on is that we let people know what’s happening, when it’s happening. We talked about school a lot last year, and we’re talking about it again. We’ve been talking about COVID numbers — illness and death, the vaccine, the hesitancy around it. Last year, we talked about the election, including during an evening election special we did with other public radio stations from across the state.”

“But we also have a feel for when people need a break,” she added. “We might do a show on home renovation and take a slight step back from the really heavy topics and let listeners hear something they just enjoy.”

Herkey said it’s important for people to connect with the show in real life as well as on the radio. COVID has prevented that. “Normally, probably every six weeks, we do some sort of event, public conversation or a live taping,” she said. “We miss those in-person connections.”

“One thing we really pride ourselves on is that we let people know what’s happening, when it’s happening.”

Wendy Herkey



Charlotte Mayor Vi Lyles sits down with *Charlotte Talks*' Mike Collins for an hour-long show once a month. Credit: Ken Brown | City of Charlotte

Morning Edition and *All Things Considered* are the bookends to WFAE's news coverage every weekday. Both news magazines, as news director Greg Collard calls them, allow listeners to start and end their day in the know. "We're doing a lot of appointment listening," he said. "Every week, we have certain feature segments on each show. It might be sports, entertainment, a fact-check segment. That's a segment we produce in partnership with WRAL and PolitiFact to fact check some of the big news of the week."

It used to be that *All Things Considered* and *Morning Edition* and were drive-time news shows. COVID has meant that many workers no longer have a commute, but many still consider WFAE's two news magazines to be essential listening.

MORNING EDITION

The news you need to prepare for the day ahead

You may not be listening in your car as you head to the office, but *Morning Edition* is likely still part of your morning routine.

“Our newscasts every hour and half-hour are must-listen radio,” said CEO Joe O’Connor. “This is where people check in because they’re wondering: Is the world OK? What do I need to know right *now*?”

Beginning at 5 a.m. each weekday, WFAE’s *Morning Edition* host Marshall Terry is prepared to tell you.

Terry gets up at about 4 a.m., but he’s thinking about the morning news when he goes to bed (at 7 or 8 p.m.) the night before. “I don’t like to have any surprises in the morning,” he said. He reviews emails and Twitter before bed to see if any big news stories have broken.

Facts matter to listeners, and they matter to Terry, too. He vets everything. “The first thing I do, always, is ask myself, ‘Does this make sense?’ Beyond that though, if it’s an AP article about a bill that just passed one of the chambers or a bill that the governor is going to sign, I like to go and actually look at the bill itself.”

“If somebody is quoting a press release, I want to see the press release,” he continued. “If somebody is quoting something on social media, I want to see the social media post. If I can find again the primary source, I will. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve said in the morning, ‘I want to see it for myself.’ I say it out loud to the person I’m working with, or I say it in my head. I’ve even checked Google Street Views of places just to make sure that, OK, they’re saying it happened here. Is this really the place?”

Terry knows many people start their day with the news. “I always try to keep in mind that some people might only be listening for 10 or 15 minutes. So, every 10 or 15 minutes — every time you’re on the air — you need to make sure it’s good because that person listening right then may not be listening 30 minutes from now.” Terry brings a local perspective to the national news show. And sometimes, local pieces go national.

Last year, one of WFAE reporter Steve Harrison’s stories hit the big time. On May 20, 2020, anyone listening to *Morning Edition* on any NPR station across the country heard Steve Inskeep say: “Charlotte Douglas International Airport ... was one of the world’s busiest, but it’s been eerily quiet because of the coronavirus pandemic. As Steve Harrison of WFAE reports, private pilots in tiny planes are taking advantage of that normally busy airport.”

Harrison knows a good story when he finds it. “These weekend aviators said this was a once-in-lifetime experience,” he said. “It was a fun feature to report.”

Morning Edition strikes a balance between the hard news people need to stay safe and the features that offer a dose of clear, blue sky.



Morning Edition host Marshall Terry.
Credit: Jeff Cravotta Photography

Ending the day in the know

“Hosting this show is fast-paced and ever-changing, and so are my decisions about what to cover,” said Gwendolyn Glenn, host of WFAE’s *All Things Considered*, which airs from 4 to 6:30 p.m. each weekday.

Glenn took over as WFAE’s *All Things Considered* host in 2019. But she was hardly a newcomer. She was a producer for *All Things Considered* at NPR in Washington, D.C., for five years and has been a reporter in WFAE’s newsroom for five years.

There are similarities between her NPR job and her current one. “I’m still looking at national issues,” she said, “but giving them a local slant.”

Glenn mixes late-breaking, hard-hitting news with features that make you think and feel. Her show typifies what CEO Joe O’Connor meant when he said, “We can make you laugh out loud, and we can make your eyes moist. We’re a powerful companion for hundreds of thousands of people.”

Another story Glenn reported that she found especially meaningful was on Dorothy Counts-Scoggins, the woman who integrated Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. “She’s a legend — she integrated her school as a child, which was so brave,” Glenn said. “She was heckled and spat on. On the 62nd anniversary of her historic walk to Harding High, she recreated that walk. They unveiled a bench with a plaque marking her accomplishment.”

Even though reporters were mostly remote, Glenn still felt a bond with her colleagues. “WFAE’s newsroom is the most collaborative one I’ve ever worked in,” she said.



All Things Considered host Gwendolyn Glenn. Credit: Jeff Cravotta Photography

“We’re a powerful companion for hundreds of thousands of people.”

Joe O’Connor

QUEEN CITY PODCAST ACADEMY

From the occult to entrepreneurship

“WFAE recognized there are lots of stories out there and not enough outlets to tell them,” said podcast manager Joni Deutsch, explaining the genesis of the Queen City Podcast Academy, which was spawned by WFAE’s 2018 community podcast contest, “The Queen City Podquest.”

The series, launched in partnership with the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library and made possible by a \$20,000 grant from the Reemprise Fund, offered beginner podcast workshops at 10 library branches across the county.

Workshop participants, ranging from university students to retirees, were eligible to take part in more advanced podcast training through the Academy, which helped them develop their podcast concept and create a trailer, which could in turn help them get sponsors.

Everyone’s got a story, as evidenced by how *different* these are. One’s on social justice, another is on the occult. There’s one on entrepreneurship and another on breastfeeding.

Getting such a diverse group of podcasters (and topics) didn’t happen by accident.

“The first thing we learned in [the *Queen City Podquest Challenge*] was that there were still voices being drowned out,” said EVP Ju-Don Marshall. “We had marketed the challenge to the people who already knew us — our listeners. In the next phase, we designed the program with the library and let them market it. We decided not to market to WFAE listeners, and it worked much more effectively. This is how we brought in and amplified diverse voices.”

CEO Joe O’Connor applauds Marshall’s lightbulb moment: “The genius of Ju-Don was letting the library do the marketing,” he said. “We wanted a diverse Academy, and letting the library promote it to their patrons ensured that.”

After two in-person classes, instructor and students pivoted to Zoom classes. Deutsch taught the basics of storytelling but also included how to grow your audience and the importance of verifying facts to develop trust with listeners and establish credibility.

She noted what an extraordinary benefit this free series is: “If participants were to go anywhere else, they’d pay thousands of dollars for this kind of training.

“The first thing we learned was that there were still voices being drowned out.”

Ju-Don Marshall

We offered it for free as part of our investment in the community. We're teaching people to create revenue streams for themselves."

"We're giving people the tools to tell their own stories," Marshall said. "They don't have to wait on us."

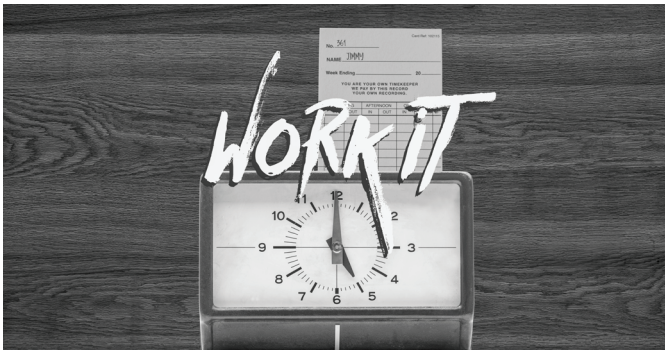
The need to tell stories — especially those of communities that have been underrepresented in the media — is always on Marshall's mind.

"I come to this work because of the inequalities I saw in Charleston, South Carolina — the community I grew up in," she said. "That's my motivation. The city tells one story if you look at one part of its population. Beyond that, there's a lot of pain and suffering that dates back to the slave trade. It's something I've worried about since I was 8 years old — how can we collectively tell the stories that need to be told?"

The community is hungry for more podcasting lessons. The Charlotte Podcast Festival, the city's first, was a virtual event last October that drew more than 13,000 registrants. WFAE was among sponsors of the free event that offered more than 40 sessions including "Record from Home, Sound Like a Pro."

"If participants were to go anywhere else, they'd pay thousands of dollars for this kind of training. We offered it for free."

Joni Deutsch



Work It, winner of The Queen City Podquest, hosts conversations about people and their relationship with their jobs. Graphic: Matthew Scott

CHARLOTTE PODCAST FESTIVAL

Anyone in the world could (and did) attend

The success of the Queen City Podcast Academy helped lead to the WFAE-produced (with partners Blumenthal Performing Arts Center, Queen City Podcast Network and Eclects Creative Agency) Charlotte Podcast Festival in 2020.

Originally conceived as an in-person two-day festival, the pandemic prevented that from happening. But a podcast festival, as it turns out, is almost uniquely suited to becoming an online event.

“By making this virtual, we were able to allow anyone in the world to attend,” said Joni Deutsch, on-demand content & audience engagement manager, host of the *Amplifier* podcast and among festival organizers.

The virtual participation and marketing strategy worked. More than 14,000 enrollees from across the globe (including participants from the U.K., China, Canada and Australia) were part of the festival.

WFAE devoted the month of October to the Charlotte Podcast Festival and hosted online sessions in the afternoons and evenings. Each week had a different theme, and each week built on the last.

And it was all free. Plus, all sessions were recorded and made available online. A year after the first festival, people are *still* finding the sessions, listening and commenting. Years from now, people may still be finding and learning from those sessions.

All were welcome. Podcasting is a democratic medium. There are very few barriers to access. By its very nature, it is inclusive. And so was the festival. “This was for podcast fans, rookies and amateurs, people who want to be podcast professionals — or already are — and public radio professionals,” said Deutsch.

The festival was recognized by *Buzzsprout* in Podcast Conferences: The Best Ones to Attend in 2020.



Presenters from the more than 40 virtual sessions and panel discussions on podcast production, editing, marketing and beyond. Credit: WFAE

“We had a variety of voices,” she continued. “And in terms of our audience, we were just as careful in making a very conscious effort to attract a diverse group. There were entire sessions devoted to diversity. *Representation in Podcasting, Diversity and Inclusion in Audience* examined the podcast landscape and traditionally underrepresented communities.”

FROM CHARLOTTE WITH LOVE

The two primary goals of the podcast festival were to highlight WFAE’s innovative community service, while showcasing the exceptional storytellers in Charlotte community (and the South, in general).

“I think this podcast festival showed there’s a lot of talent here,” said Deutsch. “And it showed that you don’t have to move to New York. You don’t have to reside in a certain ZIP code to make great content. You can do it anywhere.”

Rod and Karen Morrow, Charlotte-based hosts of *The Black Guy Who Tips* podcast, were among featured speakers at the festival. Their podcast had just become a Spotify exclusive at the time we were starting this festival,” Deutsch said. “That puts it on the same level as Michelle Obama’s podcast (also a Spotify exclusive.)”

Not only that, but the festival was recognized by *Buzzsprout* in Podcast Conferences: The Best Ones to Attend in 2020 along with well-established, world-renowned festivals. Some attendees became members right after leaving their online session. “Some people who donated had just encountered WFAE for the first time,” Deutsch said. The festival clearly made an impression.

A number of people who attended the festival had never heard of WFAE or our event partners until they attended the festival. Attendees reported they learned about the festival from Reddit, Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, the Twitter hashtag, TV news, print, word of mouth, podnews.net, Google searches and more.

“The beautiful thing about podcasting is that all it takes to make it is your imagination and a device,” said Deutsch. “And that device can be acquired on almost any budget. You can share your thoughts with the world on your own terms, whenever you want. That’s very different from, let’s say, a radio program where you have to keep it to a certain timeframe, keep it within a broadcast clock, coordinate schedules and production teams.

“With podcasting, there’s no exact limit to what can be done and who can listen to it. And the fact that you can access a podcast festival in Charlotte, North Carolina, from India and be able to hear those stories and be inspired — well, it’s a medium that is limitless in that way.”

“The beautiful thing about podcasting is that all it takes to make it is your imagination and a device.”

Joni Deutsch

AMPLIFIER

Music connects us

“We asked ourselves: What can we do for musicians right now? Stages may have been quieted, but music is still alive and well in Charlotte, even if you can’t see it.”

Joni Deutsch

In 2020 and ‘21, Joni Deutsch hosted *Amplifier*, *Charlotte Magazine*’s “Best Podcast,” a local Edward R. Murrow Award winner for “Excellence in Innovation” and a Webby Award winner (“The Internet’s highest honor,” according to the *New York Times*) for innovation in arts podcasting, from her bedroom closet.

The podcast, which began in 2018, spotlights the local music scene and the people who make it happen. “We don’t just cover musicians,” Deutsch said. “We cover venue owners, stagehands, everyone who’s part of the music-making scene.”

“In each episode ... Deutsch shows us that every great song has a backstory worth exploring,” wrote the editors of *Charlotte Magazine*. “By focusing on local musicians, Deutsch charts a scene full of thoughtful artists influenced by our shared city. For prime examples, listen to her interviews with Jamaica native Sanya N’Kanta or her episode with the Grammy-nominated HamilTones, a group that started as Anthony Hamilton’s backup singers.”

Amplifier’s Spotify playlist has more than 11 hours of music — all by Charlotte-area musicians.



Amplifier host Joni Deutsch. Credit: Chuck Eaton

Like everyone, Deutsch pivoted last year. As a result of the pandemic, she launched *Songversations*, a twice-weekly digital series. “We asked ourselves: What can we do for musicians right now? Stages may have been quieted, but music was still alive and well in Charlotte, even if you can’t see it.”

The pandemic has hit musicians and other artists especially hard. “It’s a pretty bad time when you take away what someone loves to do and what someone does for a living, and you don’t have something to replace it with,” Deutsch said. “In the spring of this year, when vaccinations were gearing up, musicians had an optimistic view. Venues were talking about reopening at least at a reduced capacity. And then the news about the delta variant made them reconsider.”

Confronting the housing crisis



Greg Jackson runs the group Heal Charlotte, which wants to buy a hotel off I-85 for a transitional housing campus. Credit: David Boraks | WFAE

In an era when many of us felt trapped in our homes, it was important to remember that too many of our neighbors don't have a home or apartment to sequester in.

Charlotte's affordable housing crisis is an epidemic. EVP Ju-Don Marshall said, "We brought a lot of attention to the issue. Even members of the economic mobility task force said we helped them understand the enormity of the issue."

For two years, WFAE examined the problem on *Finding Home*, a series that examined the scope of the issue while also seeking and evaluating solutions.

"Affordable housing is an urgent need, and so it continues to grow," said news director Greg Collard. "We wanted to address this in a weekly format, hold public officials accountable and, at the same time, let people know what's going on, what's being proposed."

"It's not just a problem for poor people," he continued. "It's become a problem for the middle class as well. There's a lot of talk that uses the generic term 'affordable housing,' but we wanted to look at: What is it really? What does it mean? What are the income requirements for a family of four, for example? What are the challenges for the community?"

COVID, of course, factored heavily into *Finding Home* stories in 2020. "The loss of jobs affected people's ability to keep up with rent," said David Boraks, a reporter on the series.

Boraks works hard to establish trust with the vulnerable people he covers. "[In 2019], I went out to a homeless encampment to interview people who have nothing," he said. "I wanted to humanize these people. It's hard for people to understand their plight unless you hear from them. Seeing it firsthand is important."

The Charlotte Journalism Collaborative, which WFAE is part of, reports on solutions to the area's affordable housing crisis. Working with the CJC made it possible for Boraks to go to Atlanta to report on one solution that a neighborhood there has found to their lack of affordable housing, said Jenn Lang, senior editor, digital news and product.

SOUTHBOUND

‘I fact check before and after’

Tommy Tomlinson is a natural storyteller. You can be forgiven for thinking his podcast — *SouthBound* (released every Wednesday) and *On My Mind* (his weekly opinion piece) — unfold effortlessly. His conversations with authors, athletes, preachers and poets born and raised in and shaped by the South *do* sound that way.

But facts are as important to his podcasts as they are to any newscast. “A big part of my job is researching my guests before they come on,” Tomlinson said. “If they’ve written a book, I read it. My questions are shaped by what I learned during my research. I fact check before *and* after an interview.”

The Black Lives Matter movement helped shape much of what *SouthBound* covered in FY20.

“Race is the signature issue in the South,” Tomlinson said. “It’s the original issue that made the South what it is and tore it apart. We wanted to linger on the issue, to sit with it — but it wasn’t a big or even noticeable shift. It’s an issue we’ve covered often.”

“After George Floyd’s death, our next episodes focused on Black Lives Matter,” Tomlinson continued. “We invited guests on who could speak to the Black experience in the South. Eddie Glaude, a Princeton professor and author, talked about James Baldwin’s views of race in the South. And historian, investor and author Fawn Weaver talked about Nearest Green, a formerly enslaved man who taught – wait for it — Jack Daniels to make whiskey.”

Tomlinson shares more than other people’s stories. Since 2018, he has shared his opinions via his weekly *On My Mind* segment. What’s on Tomlinson’s mind — Panthers football, the pandemic, the closing of a beloved Gastonia fabric emporium — is often what’s on everybody’s mind.



SouthBound host Tommy Tomlinson.
Credit: Jeff Cravotta Photography

“A big part of my job is researching my guests. If they’ve written a book, I read it. My questions are shaped by what I learned during my research.”

Tommy Tomlinson

ED WILLIAMS FIRST AMENDMENT AWARD



A free press is foundational to America’s identity. Yet the concept came under fire in recent years. In FY20, WFAE instituted an award honoring freedom of the press (which the First Amendment protects) and one journalist who has made the most of that freedom — former WFAE board chair and longtime *Charlotte Observer* editorial page editor, Ed Williams.

Board co-chair Nick Wharton reflected on the necessity of it: “When you look at the tone in Washington [in recent years], you saw the First Amendment hanging in the balance. Reporters in the U.S. are putting themselves at risk these days.” Indeed, in 2018, the United States was listed for the first time among the most dangerous countries for journalists.

Last year, Wharton continued, “There was misinformation on infection and death rates, misinformation on measures we could take to stem the spread of COVID. This was about more than politics. There are more than 800,000 American souls dead, and *still* people call the pandemic a hoax. This is a 12-alarm fire, and it’s up to reporters to determine fact from fiction. The freedom of the press is more crucial now than it ever has been.”

“I have to credit the former president with being a provocateur,” CEO Joe O’Connor said. “Calling the media the ‘enemy of the people’ was an inspiration for us. It’s helped us focus. The media’s trustworthiness is under assault.”



Ed Williams, upper right corner in bow tie, while leading a Pulitzer Prize-winning staff at The Charlotte Observer.

EVENTS

In-person and online with Ken Burns, Kai Ryssdal, NPR's Founding Mothers and more

In August 2019, before the phrase “social distancing” was part of our collective vocabulary, WFAE’s *Amplifier* podcast host Joni Deutsch kicked off Ken Burns’ *Country Music* documentary with a multi-event celebration of the genre.

First, in partnership with Blumenthal Performing Arts, Deutsch and WFAE hosted five lunchtime concerts at Spirit Square with artists such as David Childers. Then, there was the September 2019 documentary preview and live *Amplifier* taping at the U.S. National Whitewater Center, where Deutsch interviewed country musician Bill Noonan and historian Tom Hanchett, Ph.D.

Those sorts of in-person celebrations — on hiatus during the height of the pandemic — are designed to build connections among WFAE’s diverse audience. “The number-one purpose of everything we do is service,” executive director of branding and engagement Jeff Bundy said. “We want to create community.”

One method of creating community, he said, is by being intentional in our partnerships with other organizations and hosting events in locations that recognize the geographic diversity of our listeners. He pointed to 2019’s live *Charlotte Talks* tapings at Queens University of Charlotte, Winthrop University and the Harvey B. Gantt Center as prime examples.

“Partnerships make sense because they leverage the built-in assets of

organizations in the Charlotte region to collectively do more in service of Charlotteans,” said Bundy.

Before pandemic lockdowns, WFAE hosted the two annual *WFAEats* tasting events in partnership with the Charlotte Museum of History. They’re designed to highlight Charlotte’s culinary community.

“The deeper value of the *WFAEats* series is going back to that idea of shared humanity,” Bundy said. “That’s how you get to know your neighbor — you come together to break bread.”

In March 2020, when COVID-19 hit, preparations were well underway for WFAE’s annual gala. The event would feature delicious meals and Kai Ryssdal from American Public Media’s *Marketplace*.



Kai Ryssdal, host of American Public Media's Marketplace. Credit: Marketplace

The virus changed that. But fostering a sense of community among WFAE listeners, even over Zoom, was important to Bundy and community relations manager Renee Rallos.

When it became clear that WFAE wouldn't be holding in-person events

“It’s important for us to not only bring people together, but for people from the station to be with our listeners. That opens up a dialogue.”

Jeff Bundy

for a while, Bundy and Rallos adjusted.

The lunchtime concerts and live interviews that comprised 2019's Ken Burns documentary events became a prototype for *Songversations*, WFAE's first virtual event series.



NPR *Founding Mothers*, Nina Totenberg, Linda Wertheimer and Cokie Roberts, around 1979. Credit: NPR

Virtual conversations were hosted with NPR's "Founding Mothers" (Susan Stamberg, Linda Wertheimer and Nina Totenberg); former NPR *Morning Edition* co-host David Greene; NPR foreign correspondents Sylvia Poggioli, Ruth Sherlock and Eleanor Beardsley.

Town hall sessions examining healthcare in minority communities; a conversation about Charlotte filmmaker Frederick Murphy's film *The Other Side of the Coin*; bilingual conversations as part of our partnership with *La Noticia*; a session on WFAE's *Asbestos Town* project moderated by David Boraks and more all took place.

The event with Kai Ryssdal eventually happened — over Zoom, just over a year after the pandemic changed the

world. To replicate the feel of a gala, WFAE hired a local caterer to deliver meals to participants.

"We even had a custom beer made for the event by Divine Barrel Brewing," said Bundy. "That was a really nice way to ... create a shared sensory experience beyond Zoom."

A silver lining of the pandemic for WFAE has been the increased participation of individuals who had previously not been able to attend in-person events because of travel, childcare or other challenges. The station intends to continue "hybrid" events — in person with a virtual component — when COVID restrictions are lifted.

Now the challenge of accessibility has shifted from geographic location to the impact of the digital divide. But that's a challenge WFAE is ready to face. As part of the station's first fundraising campaign during the pandemic, we partnered with local nonprofit E2D (Eliminate the Digital Divide) to help provide computers and internet access to those without it.

"It's important for us to not only bring people together," Bundy said, "but for people from the station — reporters, hosts, senior staff — to be with our listeners. That opens up a dialogue that presents opportunities for listeners to tell us what we're doing well and how we can improve ... we need to be accessible and approachable."



Custom beer created in partnership with Divine Barrel Brewing for the Kai Ryssdal event.

FUNDRAISING

We can't do it without you

FUNDRAISING HIGHLIGHTS

+ 228%

'21 Grant Revenue

+ 10%

'20 & '21 Members

Positive financial results, during a period when many organizations saw their budgets decimated, demonstrate the value listeners place in WFAE.

In FY20 — during a pandemic — we had 4% revenue growth. It increased to \$7.3 million. Combined with tight expense control, that allowed WFAE to end the year dramatically above budget.

In FY21, we managed to do it again, growing our revenue by another 6.1%.

“The year 2020 was one incredibly challenging year,” said Jeff Bundy, executive director of branding and engagement. “That we closed out FY20 and FY21 with record revenues is a testament to the value that our audience has put in WFAE, but I also think it’s a testament to the professionalism and dedication of the staff.”

Despite the challenges associated with fundraising during times of economic, political and cultural strife, membership revenue grew by 4% during FY21. And thanks to some much-needed grants from organizations like Report for America, the American Press Institute and the American Journalism project, grant revenue grew by 228%.

This growth has tangible results. Among many other projects, we were able to launch the Race & Equity team at the end of FY21.

Currently funded in part by RFA grants, the team is the focus of WFAE’s ongoing capital campaign. The goal is to raise \$1.2 million over three years.

“That’s really the startup goal,” said Bundy, who credited board member Mary Tabor Engel with leading the fundraising charge among major donors. “That’s to get reporters hired and to start doing that work. Every dollar we raise above that \$1.2 million can be invested into additional services like podcasts, programs and events.”

There are many ways WFAE measures success. “We rely on metrics to measure ratings, membership growth, revenue,” said CEO Joe O’Connor. “But there are some impacts that can’t be measured. How do you measure an epiphany?”

FY21 is WFAE's sixth consecutive year of record membership results.

“We've pivoted to virtual events. The Founding Mothers event, with Linda Wertheimer, Nina Totenberg and Susan Stamberg, generated excitement and exceeded our fundraising goal.”

Jeff Bundy / On overcoming the cancellation of major events

FINANCIAL YEAR '20

Revenue

Increased to \$7.6 million

+ 3.5%

Donors

Increased to 23,210

+ 10%

Sustainers

Increased to 11,446

+ 3.6%

Membership Revenue

+ 6%

Digital Audience

+ 90%

FINANCIAL YEAR '21

Revenue

Increased to \$8.1 million

+ 6.1%

Donors

Increased to 24,698

+ 6.4%

Sustainers

Increased to 11,837

+ 3.1%

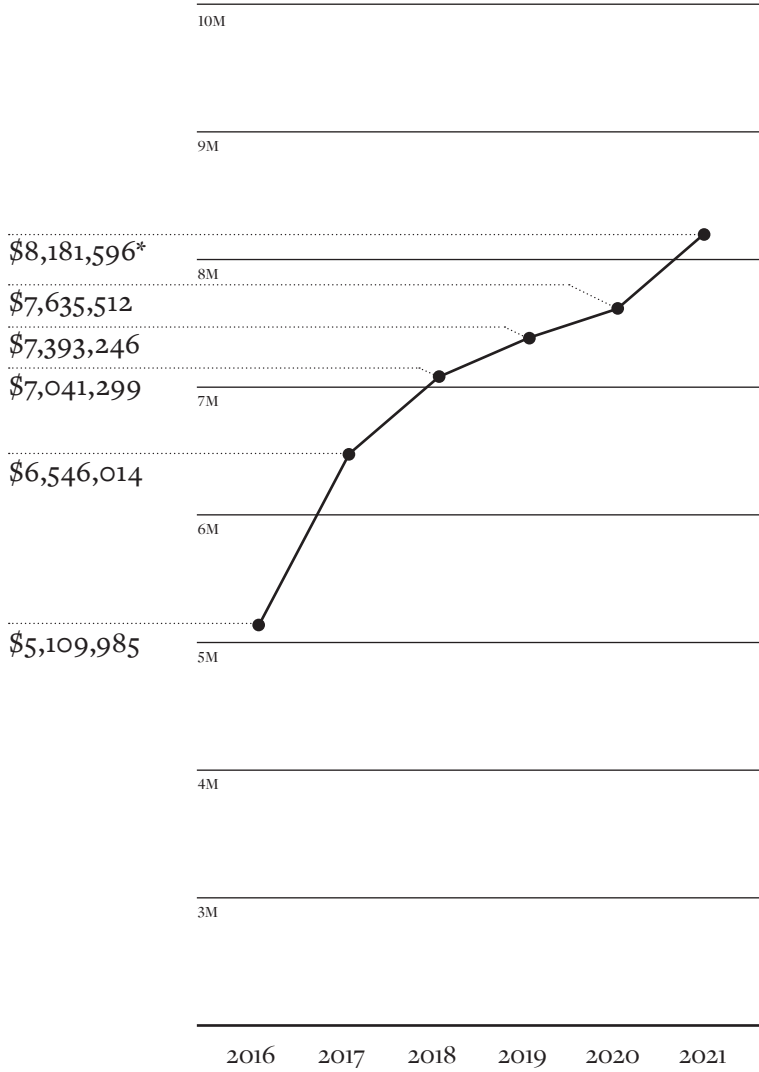
Membership Revenue

+ 4%

On-Air Audience

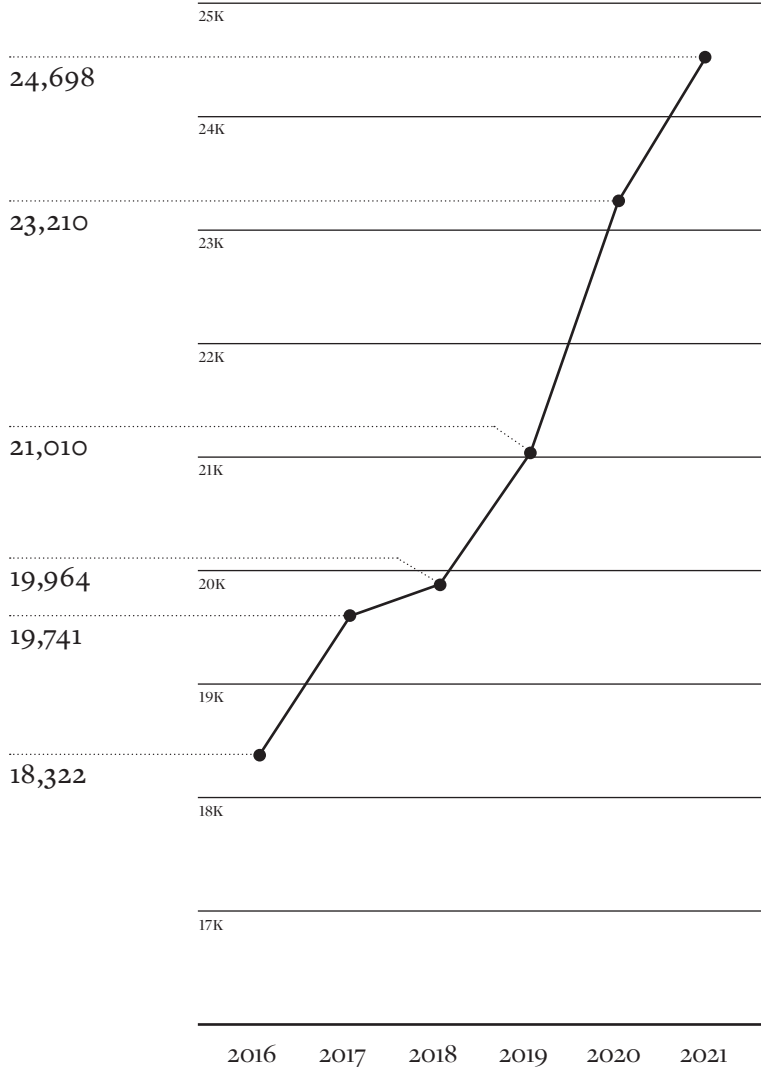
+ 15%

REVENUE



*Preliminary unaudited revenue projection, net of PPP Loan forgiveness.

MEMBERS



MEMBERSHIP

For you and because of you

“As we’ve seen during past crises ... in challenging times, people turn to WFAE for the facts they need to stay safe.”

Jeff Bundy

WFAE’s pandemic pivot was nearly seamless to listeners — except in one way. The spring 2020 fund drive was cut short.

What happened in membership?

“We were in our on-air fundraising campaign the second week in March (2020) when everything shut down,” recalled Jeff Bundy, executive director of branding and engagement. “It was the week Tom Hanks announced he had COVID-19 and the NBA cancelled their season. It’s the largest fundraiser we do all year, and we stopped it on March 13, less than halfway to our \$350,000 goal.”

It was the right thing to do. Listeners were relying on WFAE to deliver the latest news on closings, confirmed cases and community spread. “This was a crisis unlike anything we’ve collectively experienced,” Bundy said. “But as we’ve seen during past crises ... in challenging times, people turn to WFAE for the facts they need to stay safe.”

And in times of trouble, WFAE’s listeners supported the station. “After the March campaign’s early end, our members pivoted along with us,” Bundy said. “We learned how to host our on-air campaigns via Zoom, we leaned on phone calls, email, direct mail. We participated in Giving Tuesday and raffled off a Subaru Crosstrek from Tindol Subaru and \$17,000 in gift cards from Lowe’s.”

Every nonprofit needed and continues to need help, and WFAE’s benefactors have many organizations important to them. “We are mindful of the fact that people are struggling,” Bundy said. “There are a lot of other nonprofits that are completely worthy of support. The support we got indicates the vital role WFAE plays in this community.”

“We also recognized that other nonprofits and small businesses have been challenged,” Bundy said. He credits membership manager Meghann Batchelor with adding nonprofit and small business challenges to the stations on-air campaigns.

“We asked listeners to call in and donate to support WFAE’s mission and service, and when they did, they could ‘vote’ for another nonprofit or small business in the Charlotte region,” Bundy said. Each organization would get a “shout out” on air, and the organization with the most votes at the end of that day of fundraising would win \$2,500 worth of on-air messages. “It was a small thing we could do to keep WFAE strong and help out the businesses and nonprofits that needed some help,” Bundy said.

Director of Development Robert Koch, responsible for securing major gifts, noticed a change in giving patterns early in the pandemic. “Many of our donors are very regimented,” he said. “They always give – to all the organizations they donate to — on Dec. 31. But (in 2020), they felt compelled to give from March through June.”

That earlier-than-usual giving allowed the station to cushion the financial blow that resulted from postponing the second annual gala event — a conversation with Kai Ryssdal, the host of American Public Media’s *Marketplace*, originally planned for April 2020.

Member support is reaffirming to the newsroom staff. “It shows that the community believes in what we do,” EVP Ju-Don Marshall said.

KIND OF A SILVER LINING

A surge of listener support brought WFAE through the early months of the pandemic. As FY21 began, the membership and major giving teams faced the challenge of maintaining that support despite what Bundy called “the most challenging economic era of our lifetime.”

That meant testing out new strategies for engaging with listeners. On-air campaigns provide the bulk of WFAE’s membership budget and traditionally have meant long hours in the studios. Now they’ve gone virtual. So have events, including a conversation with NPR “Founding Mothers” Nina Totenberg, Susan Stamberg, and Linda Wertheimer and the 2020 Charlotte Podcast Festival — which were both attended by people around the country.

“A kind of a silver lining is that the virtual events actually make it easier for people to attend who couldn’t previously because of mobility, childcare, financial and other challenges,” Bundy said. “We will continue to do ‘hybrid’ events with virtual options even after COVID restrictions are lifted.”

Leaning on existing fundraising strategies proved especially useful.

“We’ve always made phone calls to our supporters when they reach their renewal time,” said Bundy, “but we had a significantly higher return on these calls during the pandemic. We had longer conversations with people than we usually do, too. Part of that may have been the pandemic – everyone was looking for connection. And people feel comfortable with WFAE; we’ve been a long-time companion. I think people recognize the value we bring to the community, and they wanted to help.”

Ultimately, listeners did what was needed.. they gave and total contributions grew by 2% from FY20 to FY21.

Grants also played a role in WFAE’s financial success. Thanks to the efforts of EVP Ju-Don Marshall and the major giving team, WFAE received grants from organizations like Facebook, Google, the American Press Institute and the American Journalism Project. CFO Tanya DeGrace called the latter “transformational.”

“I’m a longtime listener and donor myself,” she said, “so I care a lot about how we administer the funds because I do appreciate that people are giving us money they could be spending on something else.”

To board chair Richard Lancaster, that trust is important.

“I think the beauty of public radio is that it’s a public good,” he said. “When listeners allocate a portion of their resources to this public good, we don’t take that lightly. We want to deploy those resources in such a way that it gives back to the community and makes it — and us — better.”

“When listeners allocate a portion of their resources to this public good, we don’t take that lightly.”

Richard Lancaster

facebook

Google



AMERICANPRESS
institute

Grants from the above organizations, as well as others, have played a key role in WFAE’s financial success.

Trust, honesty and pivoting with the times

In the immediate aftermath of the pandemic, it seemed every industry — except construction and home sales — was down. The news for bars and restaurants, energy companies, performing arts venues, movie theaters, retailers and more was grim. So was the forecast for radio stations.

“In May 2020, the local radio sponsorship was down 67.6%,” said Lisa Gergely, who manages WFAE’s corporate sponsorship team. “I’ve never seen anything like it, and I’ve been doing this since 1982. WFAE was down 40%.”

Like many of their sponsors, the corporate sponsorship team faced an uncertain future. They reacted with honesty, ingenuity, and teamwork.

Gergely knew WFAE’s sponsors were hurting and offered them sponsorship opportunities at reduced rates. “We decided to try to help the people who’d been hardest hit first,” she said. “We went to nonprofits and performing arts groups and offered them new opportunities.”

Their clients appreciated their flexibility. In turn, Gergely’s team found new strategies for sponsorships.

“Podcast sponsorships have been really strong,” Gergely said. “When you download a podcast, it’s because you really want it. There’s such attentive listening involved.”

Her team found another way to offer sponsors highly targeted audiences. “Specialty programming makes it possible to connect a sponsor with the right podcast for them,” she said. “Lowe’s Home Improvement sponsoring *Finding Home* and *Rebuilding Charlotte* was a perfect partnership.”

As the pandemic continued, the corporate sponsorship team kept working to strengthen existing relationships with their clients and forging new ones.

“One of the strengths of our audience is that they want to support companies that support things they believe in,” Gergely said. “So that has enabled us, in many cases, to not feel the impact that commercial radio stations have.”

“Podcast sponsorship has been really strong ... there’s such attentive listening involved.”

Lisa Gergely

“In May 2020, the local radio sponsorship was down 67.6%. I’ve never seen anything like it, and I’ve been doing this since 1982. The fact that WFAE finished our fiscal year so strong is a true testament to the value our listeners and sponsors put into the station.”

Lisa Gergely / Executive Director of Corporate Development

FINANCIAL YEAR 2020 RECOGNITION

Regional Edward R. Murrow Awards

- Sarah Delia's podcast *The List* won in two categories — Investigative Reporting and Podcast.
- The entire newsroom's work on *The Shooting of Danquirs Franklin* won in the Continuing Coverage category.



Sara Delia
Credit: Logan Cyrus

Radio Television Digital News Association of the Carolinas

Marshall Terry's feature on the Charlotte Symphony's new piece on Charlotte's history won first place in the Light Feature category.

The RTDNAC also recognized WFAE with five second-place awards:

- *Shooting of Danquirs Franklin* (Sarah Delia) - Breaking News
- *Mark Carver Murder Conviction Overturned* (Sarah Delia) - General News
- *As Injuries Mount, City Discusses Regulating E-Scooters* (David Boraks) - Hard News Feature
- *Mark Harris Retreat Marks Stunning Reversal* (Steve Harrison) - Political
- *Oct. 29, 2018, Morning Edition Newscast* (Lisa Worf) - Radio News Block



From top to bottom: Marshall Terry,
Steve Harrison and David Boraks
Credit: Jeff Cravotta Photography

Grants

Report for America

WFAE was selected as a host newsroom. Two journalists joined WFAE, the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library and Digital Public Library of America to report on local government and community issues. WFAE and *La Noticia* shared a third journalist who reported on deportation and the Charlotte immigration court.

Google News Initiative

Through its North American Innovation Challenge, Google awarded WFAE approximately \$186,000 to build a local news platform for residents in underserved communities to work with newsrooms.

Reemprise Fund

The Reemprise Fund invested \$20,000 to support the Queen City PodQuest Workshop Series and Academy. The program offered introductory podcast workshops at 10 library branches across Mecklenburg County as well as advanced podcast training and a podcast festival.

Boards

- Joe O'Connor was elected to the NPR Board of Directors for a three-year term.
- Ju-Don Marshall was elected to the North Carolina Open Government Coalition Board for a three-year term.

Charlotte Magazine's BOB Awards

- Readers voted *Charlotte Talks* as the best Radio Show.
- Readers also gave runner-up nods to Tommy Tomlinson in the author category and *Amplifier* in the podcast category.



*From top to bottom: President and CEO Joe O'Connor and executive vice president and chief content officer Ju-Don Marshall.
Credit: Jeff Cravotta Photography*

FINANCIAL YEAR 2021 RECOGNITION

Religion News Association

Sarah Delia's *The List* won two awards:

- Best Religion Podcast - Second Place
- Enterprise Religion Reporting - Third Place

40 Over 40 Awards

The *Charlotte Ledger* recognized Ann Doss Helms as one of its honorees. The awards celebrate locals 40+ who are doing great things in the community.

Association of Marketing and Communication Professionals

WFAE's FY19 annual report was honored with a gold MarCom Award. The awards honor excellence in marketing and communication while recognizing the creativity, hard work and generosity of industry professionals.

Queen City Nerve's Best in the Nest Awards

Readers recognized:

- Mike Collins - Best Radio Personality
- *Charlotte Talks* - Best Radio Show
- *She Says* - Best Podcast

Charlotte Magazine's BOB Awards

- Editors picked Joni Deutsch's *Amplifier* as the city's best podcast.
- Readers gave a runner-up nod to *Charlotte Talks* in the radio show category.

Current's 'Local That Works' Contest

The 2020 Charlotte Podcast Festival was named a semifinalist in the 2021 contest.



From top to bottom: Ann Doss Helms, Mike Collins (Credit: Jeff Cravotta Photography), Sara Delia (Logan Cyrus) and Joni Deutsch (Daniel Coston Photography).

Grants

Holly and Paul Freestone Health Care Reporting Fellow

With a donation from Holly and Paul Freestone, WFAE created the Holly and Paul Freestone Health Care Reporting Fellow. During a yearlong fellowship, Dana Miller Ervin took an in-depth look at the data about American health care.

The High Cost of COVID-19

Several grants funded two reporter positions to look at the financial cost of COVID-19 on Black and Latino communities. Grant funders:

- Facebook Journalism Project, Lenfest Institute and the Local Media Association
- Google News Initiative Journalism Emergency Relief Fund
- North Carolina Local News Lab Fund

2020 Elections

WFAE received two grants to fund its 2020 Election Resources. WFAE used some of the funding to hire three reporters to help cover the election.

- Votebeat awarded \$42,000 to WFAE
- The American Press Institute awarded almost \$10,000 to WFAE through its Trusted Elections Network fund

Report for America

WFAE was selected as a host newsroom. Two journalists joined WFAE to report on race and equity issues.

American Journalism Project

In one of its first philanthropic investments in public media, AJP awarded \$590,000 to WFAE. The funds will be used to add positions that focus on revenue generation.



Emmy Award-winning journalist and former 60 Minutes producer Dana Miller Ervin joined WFAE as the Holly And Paul Freestone Health Care Reporting Fellow.

2020 BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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Journalist, Novelist, Screenwriter and
Communications Consultant

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Charlotte Area Fund Inc.

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Controller, Carmel Country Club

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Gabriella Chapman, Regional Training Manager, YMCA of Greater Charlotte

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Dick Sesler, Camp Blue Skies

Carolyn Shaw, Kirk, Palmer & Thigpen, P.A.

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Glenn Stewart, SunTrust

Courtney Stribling, Real Estate Investor

Jose Vega, Senior Counsel, Wells Fargo

Meg Whalen, University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Ed Williams, Author and Journalist

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WFAE Pandemic Report 2020 - 2021

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President & Chief Executive Officer,
Charlotte Area Fund Inc.

SECRETARY

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Learning & Leadership Development Client Manager,
Bank of America

TREASURER

Glenn Stewart

SunTrust, Retired

PRESIDENT

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Riaz Bhamani, Bank of America

Sharon Blalock, Spot Marketing

Chris Cicoletti, US Bank

Dan Clodfelter, State Utility Commissioner, Former Mayor of Charlotte

Gene Cochran, Retired President of the Duke Endowment

Mary Tabor Engel, Journalist, Instructor at Knight School for

Journalism at Queens University of Charlotte

Mark Ethridge, Journalist, Novelist, Screenwriter and Communications Consultant

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Tony Norwood, Trane Technologies

Kathleen Price, Ally Financial

Diana Quarry, Morrison & Foerster, LLP

Dick Sesler, Camp Blue Skies

Carolyn Shaw, Kirk, Palmer & Thigpen, P.A.

Anasa Sinegal, Central Piedmont Community College

Matthew Socha, Cherry Bekaert

Jose Vega, Senior Counsel, Wells Fargo

Meg Whalen, University of North Carolina at Charlotte

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Charlotte, N.C.

TIAA

Appointed 2019

Jennifer Beightley

Charlotte, N.C.

JLB Pilates & Coaching

Appointed 2019

Allyson Colaço

Charlotte, N.C.

Windy O'Connor Art & Home

Appointed 2020

Dr. Myah Davis

Charlotte, N.C.

Educator

Appointed 2020

Mary Dombrowski

Charlotte, N.C.

Wells Fargo

Appointed 2018

Stephen Guardipee

Charlotte, N.C.

Hatcher Law Group

Appointed 2019

Jarrett Hurms

Charlotte, N.C.

Bank of America

Appointed 2020

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Charlotte, N.C.

Marketing Consultant

Appointed 2020

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Charlotte, N.C.

The Justice Firm, LLC

Appointed 2017

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Monroe, N.C.

Wingate University

Appointed 2019

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Charlotte, N.C.

Retired from the United Nations

Development Programme

Appointed 2020

John Lincoln, Chair

Charlotte, N.C.

CoreFocus Consulting & Vice

Chair of MoRA – Monroe Road

Advocates

Appointed 2011

Barbara Lom

Huntersville, N.C.

Davidson College

Appointed 2019

Srinath Nagarajan

Matthews, N.C.

Chief Innovation and Product

Officer at Bethesda Lutheran

Communities

Appointed 2016

Hema Parekh

Charlotte, N.C.

Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond

Appointed 2018

Raquel Rivera

Charlotte, N.C.

YMCA of Greater Charlotte

Appointed 2020

Cate Sherrie

Charlotte, N.C.

Cate Communications &

TalentBridgeHR Advisory

Appointed 2016

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Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools

Appointed 2019

Dr. Shante Williams

Charlotte, N.C.

RW Capital Partners

Appointed 2019

Bryn Wilson

Mooresville, N.C.

Ogletree Deakins

Appointed 2020

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WFAE Pandemic Report 2020 - 2021

Cephas Kwame Agbeke

Charlotte, N.C.

TIAA

Appointed 2019

José Alvarez

Charlotte, N.C.

Prospera

Appointed 2021

Jennifer Beightley

Charlotte, N.C.

JLB Pilates & Coaching

Appointed 2019

Allyson Colaço

Charlotte, N.C.

Windy O'Connor Art & Home

Appointed 2020

Dr. Myah Davis

Charlotte, N.C.

Educator

Appointed 2020

Stephen Guardipee

Charlotte, N.C.

Hatcher Law Group

Appointed 2019

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Mooresville, N.C.

Brad Harvey Creative

Appointed 2021

Jarrett Hurms

Charlotte, N.C.

Bank of America

Appointed 2020

Ingrid Travis James

Charlotte, N.C.

YMCA of Greater Charlotte

Appointed 2020

Keenya Justice

Charlotte, N.C.

The Justice Firm, LLC

Appointed 2017

Dr. Magdalena Krajewska

Monroe, N.C.

Wingate University

Appointed 2019

Dennis Lazarus

Charlotte, N.C.

Retired from the United Nations

Development Programme

Appointed 2020

Katarina Moyon

Rock Hill, S.C.

Winthrop University

Appointed 2021

Barbara Lom, Chair

Huntersville, N.C.

Davidson College

Appointed 2019

Srinath Nagarajan

Matthews, N.C.

Chief Innovation and Product

Officer at Bethesda Lutheran

Communities

Appointed 2016

Raquel Rivera

Charlotte, N.C.

A Special Needs Plan

Appointed 2020

Gigi Shamsy Raye

Charlotte, N.C.

Accenture

Appointed 2021

Lecia Shockley

Charlotte, N.C.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools

Appointed 2019

Dr. Shante Williams

Charlotte, N.C.

RW Capital Partners

Appointed 2019

Bryn Wilson

Mooresville, N.C.

Ogletree Deakins

Appointed 2020

WFAE STAFF*

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Executive Assistant - Christina Allison

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Ju-Don Marshall

Director of Engineering/IT - Jobie Sprinkle

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Assistant News Director - Catherine Welch

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Morning Edition Host - Marshall Terry

All Things Considered Host - Gwendolyn Glenn

Podcast Manager - Joni Deutsch (*Amplifier* Host)

Weekend Host & Reporter - Nick de la Canal

Climate Reporter - David Boraks

Justice Reporter - Sarah Delia (*The List & Still Here* Host)

Race & Equity Reporter - Gracyn Doctor

Healthcare Reporter - Claire Donnelly

Holly & Paul Freestone Healthcare Reporting Fellow -

Dana Miller Ervin

Political Reporter - Steve Harrison (*Inside Politics* Host)

Education Reporter - Ann Doss Helms

Race & Equity Reporter - Dante Miller

Race & Equity Reporter - Maria Ramirez Uribe

Reporter - Tommy Tomlinson (*SouthBound* Host,

On My Mind columnist)

Reporter - Lisa Worf

DIGITAL TEAM

Director of Digital News & Audience Engagement -

Jennifer Lang

Digital News & Engagement Editor - Jodie Valade

Digital News & Engagement Editor - Dash Coleman

Digital News Producer - Matt Rasnic

CHARLOTTE TALKS

Host - Mike Collins

Executive Producer - Wendy Herkey

Senior Producer - Erin Keever

Assistant Producer - Jesse Steinmetz

ON AIR HOSTS

Operations Manager & Host - Tena Simmons

Bob August

Chris Edwards

Della Freedman

Chris Jones

Jennifer Montague

Judith Porter

Michael Szymanski

Alison Van Pelt

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Major Gifts Officer - Caitlin Forrest

Advancement Associate - Tori Chester

Graphic Designer - Matthew Scott

Copywriter - Page Leggett

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Lisa Gergely

Senior Corporate Development Specialist -

Noelle Culler

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Steve Jameson

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Accounting Manager - Kim Tritt

Business Analyst - Jason Leighton

Traffic Manager - Brenda Grubb

Human Resource Manager - Sarah Shanks



It was the best of times.

Well, maybe not the best. But *when we looked for silver linings, we found a few.* That is not to deny the pain, suffering and profound loss many Americans felt and still feel.

Despite the challenges the pandemic has created, there were reasons to celebrate. *Supporters were overwhelmingly generous — perhaps because these years were extraordinarily brutal. We applied for — and got — a significant government loan that doesn't need to be paid back.* That's unlikely to happen again.

“Ju-Don Marshall was able to bring in enormous amounts of grant money,” CEO Joe O'Connor added. “That allowed us to actually expand. We won a grant from a donor-advised fund for the healthcare investigative reporter, Dana Miller Ervin —

someone who's won an Emmy. We're lucky to have her.”

As we all contemplate “a new normal” — a phrase that's being used almost as much as the word “pivot” was in 2020 — we have to acknowledge the hard work ahead. On a macro level, there's still uncertainty. The virus is still here and still deadly. Not everyone wants to get the vaccine. Not everyone wants to wear a mask. The economy will take years to recover.

On a micro level, WFAE's corporate sponsors' marketing budgets have been depleted, and in some cases, decimated. Being member-supported is, we believe, the best funding model — but it also comes with uncertainty. How generous can our listeners afford to be?

We've been more efficient. *Given what we — together with our members — accomplished last year, we know we can rise to any challenge.*

We see reasons for optimism. And we hope WFAE gives you reasons to be optimistic, too. *“We’re not just a radio station,” CEO Joe O’Connor has said. “We’re a constant companion, a voice of hope.”*

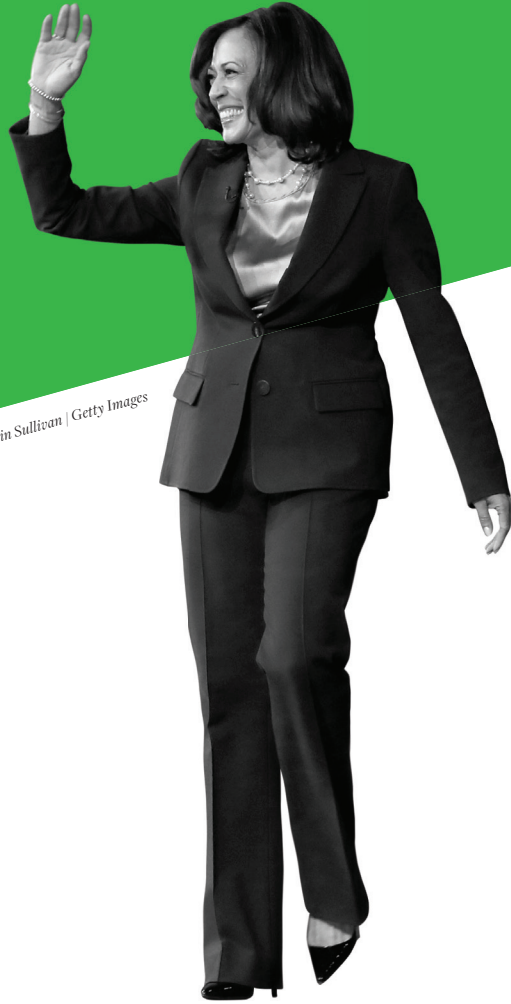
Thanks to the largesse of our listeners, we're thriving. Everything we have accomplished, or will accomplish, is because of you.

The only certainty now is that we will all continue to face challenges. We can meet those challenges and bring our community the insight necessary to navigate them with generous support of listeners like you.

WITH YOUR ONGOING SUPPORT, WE WILL CONTINUE TO DELIVER THE NEWS –

THE FACT-BASED NEWS – YOU AND YOUR FAMILY DEPEND ON TO NAVIGATE LIFE.

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WE WILL CONTINUE TO TELL THE STORIES OF NATIONAL AND LOCAL LEADERS.





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**AND WE WILL NEVER STOP TELLING THE STORIES
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New Dominion-Park Natl Bank	Southminster	
Nexsen Pruet	Spectrum Reach Advertising	
Next Step Ed	Spruce Pine Potters Market	
North Carolina Cooperatives	St. Mary's School	
North Carolina Health Assc	Steinway Piano Gallery-Char.	
North Carolina Healthcare Assc	Sun-Raised Foods	
North Carolina Local Food Council	Suntrust Bank	
Northeastern University	Taylor Richards & Conger	
Novant Health	TFM Carolinas	
Nufabrx	The Employers Association	
Orange County Artists Guild	The Fresh Market	
Original Mattress Factory	The Greener Apple	
OrthoCarolina	The Involvement Practice	
Paper Skyscraper	The Justice Firm	
Parsec Financial	The Pump House Restaurant	
Pats Place Child Advocacy Ctr	The Van Winkle Law Firm	
PBS (Frontline)	Theatre Charlotte	
PBS NC	Thrown Together Potters	
PCMA	Tindol Subaru	
People's Bank	Tosco Music	
Petit Philippe	TowneBank	
Pioneer Springs Community Sch	Trinity Episcopal School	
	Truist	
	Tryon Medical Partners	

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