

Brennan shares the tricks of the trade



Segue • SIUE

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At Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, students are able to enjoy the rural, small-town feel of the campus and its surrounding communities. When students need a break from hitting the books, taking a 20-minute trip to St. Louis can be a perfect opportunity for them to enjoy concerts, museums, sporting events, shopping and other activities.

On that cruise to the city, radio listeners may turn on KMOX for the latest news and various talk shows. On this week's episode of Segue, SIUE's premier radio show discussing the ideas and issues on campus and beyond, SIUE Chancellor Randy Pembroke, PhD, interviews Charlie Brennan, the award-winning KMOX broadcaster, for a conversation about Brennan's voyage into the radio industry.

Brennan hosts his own talk show, The Charlie Brennan Show, weekdays from 8:30-11 a.m. Within the show, he discusses local, national and international issues, interviews newsmakers, and interacts with leaders. In 2018, he will celebrate his 31st year on the air in St. Louis. He is also moderator, or "provocateur," on KETC-TV's Donnybrook, the highest-rated locally produced talk show on PBS, which airs at 7 p.m. on Thursdays. When he's not in the studio, or hosting his show, he enjoys writing about and celebrating St. Louis' rich history and volunteering.

Growing up in Cleveland, Brennan was fascinated by his local idol and legendary media personality Phil Donahue. Inspired by Donahue and other radio personalities, the young boy would call the play-by-play of his friends' activities on the playground.

"To make a long story short," Brennan said, "I ended up volunteering at the radio station at Boston College. After graduating in '82, I didn't find much gainful employment in the business world.

"A friend of mine called and told me about a radio job in Newton, Massachusetts," he said. "I took it, and the rest was history."

Brennan's genuine on-air nature eventually led him to an interview with KMOX in 1988.

"When I got hired, the legendary program director Bob Osbourne told me why they flew me in from Boston for the interview," Brennan said. "He said, 'When we hear you talk on the radio, it sounds like you genuinely care.'"

“I do care about the issues of the day, the community and the people who are listening to the show. I may not have the greatest voice, or the greatest mind or knowledge, but I do care and have a concern. That comes through in talk radio.”

With the current political and social climate, finding topics for his daily radio show or weekly television show hasn’t been difficult. However, the challenge in his profession involves filtering through many topics and sometimes, throwing away good ideas due to a lack of time.

“Do you normally have a good sense of identifying topics that can get the telephone lines ringing or is it hard to predict?” Chancellor Pembroke asks.

“I don’t just choose topics to get the phones to ring,” Brennan says. “If there’s a topic that causes some sort of outrage, I can guarantee that most folks will call in. If we give away free money or prizes, or bring in a great guest, the phones will ring, too.”

Above all, Brennan recognizes that all of the hard work he and other radio personalities do would be nothing without the work of the audio engineers, producers, booking specialists and other station staff members.

“The folks behind the scenes are the key, and that’s true for any organization,” Brennan says. “My colleague Peggy Cohill spent 42 years booking guests, and got names like Robert Duvall, Alan Alda and Jimmy Carter in our studio. She had a rolodex that was the size of the Washington Monument and had everyone’s number!”

“That gives me the opportunity to thank our engineer, Mike Cathey,” Chancellor Pembroke says. “Thank you, Mike, for all your hard work!”

On top of all of his other responsibilities, Brennan’s passion for St. Louis has ignited a love for history and writing. He has written or co-written three books about the city, “Amazing St. Louis: 250 Years of Great Tales and Curiosities,” “Here’s Where: A Guide to an Illustrious St. Louis” and “Walking Historic Downtown St. Louis.”

“When you researched for your books, were there particular historical figures that stood out and stuck with you throughout the years?” Pembroke asks.

“Gerty Cori and her husband, Carl, came to the United States to escape anti-Semitism in Europe,” Brennan says. “They worked in Buffalo, N.Y. and ended up on the campus of Washington University. She worked at a tenth of her husband’s salary for years until 1947 when the two won the Nobel Prize in medicine, and she was the first woman to ever receive that award. Leaders at that university decided to elevate her position to a tenured professor.

“I love that story, because she is a great example to us all. She overcame adversity, was really smart and accomplished great things. There’s even a crater named after her on the moon! She looked at how things were digested in the human body, and we still benefit from that research today.”

In the spirit of benefiting others, Brennan also dedicates a large part of his time volunteering and serving various community organizations. Though he maintains a humble demeanor when it comes to his own charitable endeavors, he shares that the personal growth that comes with serving those in your own community is the most rewarding part of the experience.

“In St. Louis, you meet so many interesting people,” he says. “When you help others, whether it’s working with the Rotarians or the Boy Scouts, or planting flowers downtown, your life is enriched by the relationships you develop.”

To hear Brennan tell Pembroke about life behind-the-scenes on the productions of Donnybrook, more about his love of St. Louis history and philanthropy, and possible solutions to the ongoing challenges within St. Louis, tune in at 9 a.m. on Sunday, Dec. 10 to Segue on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound.

By Madelaine Gerard, SIUE Marketing & Communications