

Local TV personality is
back at WSIE. Can he save
jazz radio?



BY ELIZABETH DONALD

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It was 1972, and the fledgling Southern Illinois University Edwardsville had only had its radio station for two years when Steve Jankowski first came to work.

SIUE is one of the few universities to have a full 50,000-watt radio station license, Jankowski said, which gave those early mass communications students experience working on a real radio station. Often lauded as the only true jazz station in the St. Louis market, WSIE has been operating since Sept. 4, 1970, a jazz station for at least 30 of those years, much of that time as an NPR affiliate and always with a mixture of students and staff behind the microphones and sound boards.

“This is where my broadcast career began 45 years ago,” Jankowski said. “I love radio and I deeply love this radio station. It provided me the educational platform I needed to launch a successful career.”

Jankowski’s career took him into St. Louis radio as a sports announcer, then news radio, and eventually to television, where he rose to Illinois bureau chief for KSDK before leaving in 2006. He returned to SIUE as director of alumni affairs, but in November, he moved to WSIE. He became interim general manager of the radio station in January with a new challenge: Save the radio station.

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WSIE is facing the probable loss of its state appropriation, which could mean shutting down the station for good. The total budget for WSIE is approximately \$181,000 per year, which is small compared to other small radio stations that draw in millions per year and can afford some of the more popular NPR programming such as “All Things Considered,” Jankowski said.

Of that \$181,000 a year, approximately \$140,000 comes from a state appropriation renewed every three years. But this term, WSIE was ordered to become self-sustaining by the time this appropriation runs out next year, according to Doug McIlhagga, director of university marketing and communications.

“I have not been told that there will be no further appropriation,” McIlhagga said. “But we were told we had to make it self-sufficient within three years.”

That means fundraising of \$150,000 per year, or at least \$12,000 a month, between underwriting, advertising and donations. That’s the goal that Jankowski is striving for — with his staff of two, including himself.

“We have gone to a fundraising approach that utilizes the air without destroying the programming,” Jankowski said. There’s a link on the WSIE website to allow direct donations from listeners, and every hour on the hour, his prerecorded voice reminds listeners that donations are needed to help support the radio station. “The Illinois budget crisis continues, and so does our need for any financial support you can provide,” it says each hour.

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Steve Jankowski, interim general manager, WSIE

Jankowski hopes that will be more helpful than a marathon fundraising blitz, as some publicly-supported stations choose to do. “We provide an update: Here’s our need, here’s how you can help,” he said.

He also is trying to increase their underwriting — businesses and organizations that provide donations in return for an announcement that “this programming is brought to you by” that business. In the last four months, they’ve gained eight or nine new businesses as underwriters, and fundraising rose to finally hit the

\$12,000 mark in May. It's dropped off some in June and July, however, so Jankowski knows the work isn't done yet.

"We're striving for consistency," he said. "If we can generate \$12,000, we can go to the powers that be and say, 'We can sustain this.'"

Part of that has been changing the format — a decision long resisted for the diehard jazz fans, Jankowski said. For more than 30 years, the station has had a "very loyal albeit small following" as strictly jazz. But in the last few months, WSIE has gradually begun to include more smooth jazz, blues and R&B music, which Jankowski said aims for a "rich texture of music, enjoyable and melodic."

He didn't want to alienate the longtime jazz fans, Jankowski said, but they needed to broaden the base of listeners. At first, there was dismay: Calls from longtime listeners complaining about the change. No matter what they said, Jankowski said, every caller got a call back from him personally, explaining the situation and the need to broaden the audience in order to stay viable.

And on Monday, WSIE gained a new name: The Sound. It's the sort of name that's easier for people to remember, he said, since call letters and the 88.7 frequency aren't as memorable.

WSIE is also available now for livestreaming on the Internet via its website, wsie.com, which lets people run the station on their computers all day. That's led to donations and support from all over the world, Jankowski said: from Las Vegas to Mexico City, New Jersey to Los Angeles to Canada.

"It's people listening to us online and responding to our calls for help," Jankowski said. "People online can find jazz formats elsewhere, but they're responding to us."

Jankowski has struck up trade agreements with local news organizations and magazines, with the Chamber of Commerce and others, reciprocating free advertising for the station to lower the cost of promoting WSIE as well.

McIlhagga said the station is considered a valuable asset by the administrators at the university, and the mass communications department is trying to work more radio into the broadcast students' curriculum. Jankowski said he hopes to hire at least one student to handle social media and the website, perhaps to begin morning newscasts and eventually get live voices on the air. Right now, it's an

automated system with prerecorded shows and commentary from their guests, such as the financial advice show at 9 a.m. on Saturdays provided by a local financial planning firm.

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And when something live happens, it's often Jankowski himself on the air. He handled the live broadcast of former Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders' visit to SIUE earlier this year, aired live on the station.

He's also reached out to the theater department in the hopes of developing live radio dramas like the old-time radio shows used to have, as a teaching tool for departments beyond mass communications.

"It helps to promote the reputation of the mass communications department and the college of arts and sciences," Jankowski said. "It helps prepare these students for their careers."

But beyond the walls of the university, Jankowski said WSIE is "literally another voice for people to find culture, music and information." He refers to WSIE as a "regional treasure" that he considers irreplaceable, both for the culture of the metro-east and as an opportunity for students.

"It is next to impossible for a university to acquire a 50,000-watt license now," he said. "It's something this university acquired through hard work and the dedication of the original faculty."

And for him, it's about saving his home. "I'm loving being at the station and working in radio again," he said. "It's frustrating because you don't know what will happen. But it's fun to be back doing radio, doing the best we can under the circumstances and make something positive out of this."

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