

Bruce Wirth '86

Radio power to the people

Ever noticed how, when people are talking about something that really matters to them, they tend to lean forward in their seat? It's as though their passion has a physical energy, pushing them and their message outward.

Bruce Wirth is sitting like that. He's talking about freedom of expression—not liberal, not conservative, just free speech—and 90.7 KSER, the community radio station in Everett, Wash., where he has served as general manager since August 2006.

"Our motto is, 'your independent voice for news and culture,'" Bruce says. "We are committed to making sure everyone in the community can be part of public dialogue and give community members the opportunity to be on the air."

He's true to his word. Last year KSER teamed up with the Snohomish County League of Women Voters to produce three months of local campaign coverage. "We were the only broadcast station in our area to cover the local elections," Bruce says.

And you can hear every kind of music imaginable on 90.7, played by more than 100 volunteers. One of them is Karen Pauley '79, host of "Nordic Roots and Branches," which features Scandinavian music. She credits Bruce with improving programming and on-air professionalism.

"That has attracted more listeners," she says. "He's gotten more people aware of the importance of community radio, especially as we see more media conglomerates and takeovers. Independent radio is the last bastion of free speech."

Bruce made his first foray into journalism when he volunteered with *Real Change News*, a weekly publication in Seattle that addresses poverty and homelessness. The experience stirred his passion for social justice and open communication.

Not long after, he met Ruth Schubert, then a reporter and union leader at the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. They married in 2000 and have two young daughters; Ruth is now communications director at Children's Alliance. "We've got media on the brain in our house," Bruce adds.

KSER was founded in 1991 when non-commercial station KRAB folded after 29



CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW? Bruce Wirth manages KSER, a radio station run almost entirely by volunteers. Among them, Karen Pauley '79, who hosts a show called "Nordic Roots and Branches."

years. The Jack Straw Foundation, which ran KRAB, helped start the station, but the connection stops there. Operating capital comes largely from listener contributions and business underwriters in the listening area from Edmonds to Arlington and Pt. Townsend. The station has just three paid employees: Bruce, a news director, and a fundraiser.

In addition to the eclectic music, KSER programming includes news from the BBC, the Canadian Broadcasting Corp., Democracy Now! from the Pacifica network, and other sources. Only 1 percent of the sta-

tion's budget comes from the federal government. According to Bruce, that's good for free expression because stations affiliated with NPR, for example, have to watch what they say due to their dependency on federal funds.

"We can take risks," he says. "To sustain democracy, we need a range of ideas, even the unpopular ones. Censorship is not the answer. At KSER, we believe in everyone's right to participate in the dialogue of democracy. If the station has the resources, we can help everyone get involved in shaping our community." — Lynda McDaniel