

Dr. Don Is In The House

More than just a funny voice

A single mom at the end of her rope.

She lived with her two kids in a tiny one-room flat in San Jose. The room had no stove, so she cooked over Sterno. It wasn't a pretty picture. "I decided the world would be better off without me," she said. Her plan was simple: Get in the car, hit the accelerator, close her eyes, and ram into a freeway overpass.

The streets were slick in the Bay Area that morning. *Just makes it easier*, she thought. For some reason — she can't recall why — she turned on KFRC/San Francisco. "You said something that snapped me out of it," she wrote to Dr. Don Rose later. "I don't remember what, but it gave me the strength to keep trying."

As he recounts this story, Rose is very low-key. "A couple of things like that make it all seem worthwhile," he says. He speaks very softly; maybe it's his recent surgery.

More likely, it's his humanity.

MIDWEST VALUES

Buffalo Bill and Don Rosenberg had one thing in common: They were both from North Platte, NE, where elephants go to die, where hitchhikers hold up signs that plead "Anywhere but here."

Rosenberg — long before he became Dr. Don Rose — was 15 and needed a couple hundred bucks to go to a Boy Scout National Jamboree in Valley Forge, PA. The local newspaper held a contest, which Rosenberg won. He would report on the Jamboree for the paper. Not to be outdone, the local radio station jumped into the fray. It gave him a choice: report for the paper or the station. "I was a terrible speller," admits Rose. "So I decided to go for radio. I swear, that's the only reason."

And so it was that young Don Rosenberg got his first taste of radio. By the way, while he was at the Jamboree, he got to interview Dwight Eisenhower, not too long before Ike became president.

The station's calls were KODY (surprised?). When Rosenberg came home from scouting, he did some weekend and hang-around stuff and then headed off to the University of Nebraska in Lincoln to study accounting and look for a real radio job. There were no offers, though, so he spent his freshman and sophomore years at the campus station, KNUS. He says he was the only person at the station to notice that KNUS spelled backward was SUNK.

In the middle of Rosenberg's junior year his friend Al Canyon scored a real radio job in Lincoln. Rosenberg, sensing opportunity, auditioned for Canyon's old

position at KWBE/Beatrice, NE and got it. "Al had a very unfortunate habit," remembers Rose. "When he came to a word he couldn't pronounce, he'd just jiggle the mike switch." Eventually KLMN/Lincoln caught on and fired Canyon, and Rosenberg took over for him again.

In 1955 Rosenberg, a few hours short of graduation, got a call from Chick Crabtree at KOIL/Omaha and went for it. "Four years, but no degree," Rose says.

A ROSENBERG, BY ANY OTHER NAME

Don Burden, KOIL's owner, told Crabtree that he was crazy for hiring the kid, and, after only four weeks, they gave Rosenberg the axe. But all was not lost. Crabtree had told Rosenberg, "Look, your name is too long. Shorten it to Rose ... and, gee, your initials are D.R. We'll call you Dr. Don."

"It was better than Gary Owens," laughs Rose. "They called him 'the GO man.'"

How Rose got hired by Don Keyes at KTSA/San Antonio, which happened next, is a bit hazy. What's not is who fired him: One month into Rose's new job, Gordon McLendon heard him on the air and gave Keyes the word.

Tail between his legs, Rose headed home to Nebraska. His heart was set on working for Todd Storz in Omaha. Bill Stewart, Storz's right hand, told him he wasn't ready but helped him find work at KRNY/Kearney, NE.

"It was really a big step backward," Rose says. Fifteen months later he was fired again. It would be the last time.

He couldn't find work. For a few months he pounded spikes for the Union Pacific Railroad. His parents didn't say a word.

When he got back to radio, it was at KWMT in Fort Dodge, IA, where he did the morning show ("Did you wake up grouchy, or is she still in bed?"), programmed for the first time and met Kae, his wife for life.

After a year, still determined to join the Storz organization, he moved to KTUL/Tulsa, OK, hoping it'd be close enough to Oklahoma City and KOMA for someone to take notice. But no one did, so, in 1959, he accepted a job at WEBC in Duluth, MN. "Kae was watching the news when I called," says Rose. "It was close to 40 below zero."

THE BIG TIME

Rose settled down in Duluth. "Those five years were

a killer for Kae," he says. "But, professionally, it worked out extremely well for me."

He was programming, and, as it is for most PDs, his biggest challenge was morning drive. "I finally thought, 'If I can't find a morning man, I'll become one myself.'" Rose told corny Finlander jokes, got a cowbell and was generally crazy. The show began to evolve into what he'd eventually do in Philly and San Francisco. He stuck it out for three cold years, and then WQXI/Atlanta called.

He bought a white Buick convertible, packed up the family and motored south.

He was hired to do 9 to noon, but while 'QXI's PD was on vacation, GM Kent Burkhardt moved Rose to morning drive. "I was up for the challenge," says Rose. Reverberant, energy, goofy, funny. He conquered Atlanta. WQXI was No. 1 in morning drive.

And then along came WFIL/Philadelphia. It was 1968. Philly embraced him. Same ingredients, but even better. "I'm not sure I ever got to be a solid No. 1," he recalls, "but WFIL was the No. 1 music station."

Stop.

In 1972 Dr. Don suffered a heart attack. "Open-heart surgery and some pretty horrible complications," he explains. He was off the air from Oct. 3, 1972 until June the next year. When he returned, his WFIL show was different.

"Instead of the rapid-fire, move-move-move thing, sometimes I'd just stop and say, 'You know, we have to talk about this.'" He brought up his home life and had his family on the air at Christmas. "I started to be more Don Rosenberg on the air and less Dr. Don Rose."

THE SAN FRANCISCO TREAT

Still, WFIL execs weren't exactly thrilled by his nine-month absence. For now, that's all I'll say.

In 1973 *Billboard* named Rose Disc Jockey of the Year. While in Los Angeles to accept the award, he ran into his old friend, RKO's Paul Drew. When Drew discovered that Rose wasn't married to Philly, things went into motion.

Shortly thereafter Rose became the morning man at KFRC/San Francisco. How and why the city fell in love with him and came to consider him family deserves a column of its own. Truly.

"I don't think it's the zaniness people remember me for," Rose says today. "I think it's basically one line: 'If nobody's said it to you, I'd like to be the first — good morning!'"

That, and his humanity.

NEXT WEEK: Michael Scott Shannon

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Dr. Don Rose

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