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WOCG/WJOU Oakwood University Radio Station

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On January 7, 1979, praise to God began flowing from a 210-foot antenna on the campus of Oakwood College: 90.1

FM WOOG officially began broadcasting *The Best in Music and the Spoken Word* each day for 12 hours. The years leading up to that momentous day in January of 1979 were ones of uncertainty and a true journey of faith for the administration, staff, and faculty of what was then called Oakwood College.

There was a need at Oakwood, a need for the programs of the school to expand and encompass technological advances. Many talented students needed to be trained in broadcasting and communication. In a September 8, 1976, letter to the Lilly Endowment Foundation, the college development officer and radio project director Harold Lee wrote, "Just as science students delve into experiments in a laboratory and preservice education majors participate in classroom teaching activities, those students interested in the communicative arts must have a way of practicing their theoretical skills. A radio station will serve as a training center for students in broadcasting journalism, speech and related fields."¹

Most compelling was the need for young men and women to be trained in a field that could help finally fulfill the gospel commission of taking the message of Jesus Christ into all the world. This mission was urgently felt by the ministers of education at Oakwood. Many students were called into gospel ministry and were receiving training in theology and religion at the school. Other students were being trained to be excellent writers and grammarians in the Department of English. Unfortunately, there was a gap in training in broadcasting: there was no department of communication at the school.

James E. Dykes, Sr., journalist, minister, former editor of *Message*, and product of Oakwood, returned as a professor in the 1970s. He understood the need for a new program and became a champion for the expansion of Oakwood's offerings in the field of communication and broadcast journalism. Interest in radio broadcasting had been evident since the 1960s, when a radio club was formed on the campus. Dykes reflected that the students in the club studied the FCC (Federal Communications Commission) operator's handbook, and "one or two students got their third-class permits."² By the early to mid-1970s the need for a radio station was met by a young man named Richard Johnson, whose passion for a radio station at Oakwood was manifested in the installation of small transmitters and wiring from various dormitories and halls on the campus to unofficially broadcast within the confines of the campus. It was clear that the school had to move forward with "Project Radio," as Dykes and Emerson Cooper, the academic dean, called it. Cooper charged Dykes with the leadership of the project and for bringing it to fruition.³ Dykes approached Rick McKinney, the only person on the campus with the skill set and first-class FCC license needed for the application to build a radio station in the United States.⁴

In 1974 Project Radio became a cooperative effort with administrators from Oakwood and from Southern Missionary College's chair of the Department of Communication, E. D. Dick, and his students.⁵ Their invaluable contribution of a completed feasibility study helped with the official preliminary legal paperwork needed for approvals from the FCC as well. Meanwhile, in the spring of 1974, Richard Johnson directed the operation of the campus carrier—current radio station WOAK. Even as a student, his leadership and passion for radio was a catalyst for training students in radio broadcasting and radio broadcast engineering. R. Timothy McDonald states that Richard Johnson was largely responsible for keeping the station project in the forefront of everyone's minds.⁶ Other students were deeply passionate about the project, and brought engineering talents to it. Such students as Jerome Poindexter, Courtney Osborne, and Lee Forde were indispensable in bringing the dream of a full-power station to reality.

The journey to the first test broadcasts was truly a walk of faith. From the initial granting of the construction permits to build the station in June of 1974, to the actual operation of the station in 1979, it was a nightmare of extensions and missed deadlines for more than four years because of the lack of solid funding for the project.⁷ Even in the 1970s, building a good, full-power radio station from the ground up was moderately priced at \$250,000.⁸ That kind of money was not in the school's budget, and there were so many other pressing needs on the campus. In the cover letter to a proposal to the Lilly Endowment, Oakwood president Calvin Rock noted that without the help of donors, Oakwood would lose the 90.1 frequency permit from the FCC.⁹ Although the college's budget committee had made some provisions in its 1974–1975 budget for Project Radio, the worsening national economic situation had its impact upon institutional operations, and they were forced to withdraw this item, along with some others.

Despite the best efforts of the development team under the direction of Harold Lee and the administration, the proposal was ultimately rejected, and the school was back at square one. Amid changing personnel, graduating student workers, and the vital concerns of the college, the dream of the radio station began to fade. The money just was not there. Even though donations of equipment had been made from NASA and Marshall Space Flight Center, much of it was discarded materials from space projects that needed a great deal of work to make it usable.¹⁰

The years sped by, and permit after permit was extended, until they completely expired in March of 1977. The dial position and license were nearly lost. Reapplications were completed and granted by September, but the school was up against the clock with even more limited resources, because of the national recession.¹¹ A South Central Conference official named Isaac Johnson led a rallying cry for the radio project. Johnson made contacts with others who were able to come to the aid of the school—some financially and others with the knowledge and skills needed to create the station. Johnson and George Powell of the Southern Union met with college officials and brought much-needed engineering help and knowhow in the form of Jerry Mathis, chief engineer of WSMC, and A. K. Nielsen, from Harbert Hills Academy in Tennessee.¹² Several students completed training as electronic engineers and became pivotal to the radio project. Jerome Poindexter became a lead engineer, and several other young men, including Courtney Osborne and Lee Forde, received real hands-on training in broadcast engineering. This team pulled together to erect the 210-foot tower and antenna system by the spring of 1978.¹³

Despite the amazing progress being made, it was still not moving as quickly as needed. Four years had passed since the first construction permits were granted by the FCC.¹⁴ Deadline after deadline had been extended. The absolute

final deadline was set for December of 1978. WOCG had to be operational, or the permits would permanently expire. Gifts were solicited from around the nation, and many people and organizations rallied to the call. The National Alumni of Oakwood gave generously through the various local chapters, as did the various regional conferences and Adventist-laymen's Services and Industries (ASI). Dykes noted, "The General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Communication Department gave time and counsel as well as funds for some equipment components."¹⁵

As the equipment rolled onto the campus, workers from the campus physical plant services under the leadership of Leonard Douglas carefully unloaded the much-prayed-for and refurbished transmitter. McDonald recalled the great debate about who would be climbing the tower to help with the installation. "I only got as far as about 10 feet or so," he laughed. "William Evans and Leonard Douglas really did a great deal of the work on the project."¹⁶ It was all a great labor of love for so many who volunteered their time to this great task. The excitement built as the new full-power radio station was about to become reality.

Then disaster struck. The transmitter failed one week before the final deadline. The cost to replace a damaged tube was \$800.¹⁷ It might as well have been \$1 million, because the \$800 was needed immediately to have any hope of getting the parts back in time to install and test before the first pilot broadcast. There was no money left. But we serve a God who owns the "cattle upon a thousand hills," and He always knows our needs before we even call.¹⁸ A single donor heard what was happening, walked into the studio, and immediately wrote a check for the entire \$800. The tube arrived and the first test broadcasts made the FCC deadline when they began on December 3, 1978.¹⁹

WOCG began broadcasting daily on January 7, 1979, from 10:00 a.m. until 10:00 p.m., with a "dayparting" format of different genres of religious and classical music, as well as religious and community service programming. Soon thousands of people within a 100-mile radius heard the everlasting gospel being proclaimed from this small station at Oakwood College. Soon the hours were extended to 18 per day, operating from 6:00 a.m. until midnight, as the station became known by the moniker of "The Best in Music and the Spoken Word."²⁰

The launch of the radio station heralded an era of academic expansion for the college. For the first time, the *Oakwood College Bulletin, 1979–1980* listed the requirements for the Associate of Science degree in communications.²¹ The minor in communications had previously offered more of an emphasis in print journalism and rhetoric and had been made available for only about three years. The expansion of the first degree in the field offered courses in radio and television production. James Dykes had returned from study leave prior to the opening of the station and was a key advocate in the creation of the degree in the field. Under the able leadership of department chair Bernard Benn, the program achieved recognition in the new name of the Department of English, Communications, and Foreign Languages, and by 1982 the college was able to offer the Bachelor of Arts degree in communications.²² It is clear that the radio station helped to provide a vehicle for hundreds of students to learn broadcasting and to earn degrees in their chosen field of study.

The radio station was temporarily directed by James Dykes and his wife, Ethel, but the first full-time general manager was Stanley Ware. An Oakwood music professor, Ware helped to create the fine-arts programming of the station with the help of the Music Department. Several young men who worked under Ware's tutelage honed their broadcasting skills and later went on to careers in ministry, broadcasting, education, and entertainment. These include Charles Tapp, James Humphreys, Theodore "Ted" Rivers, and Jonathan Slocomb.²³ During those early years there was some shifting regarding where the radio station fit as a department. Should it operate under the academic Department of Music, or Department of English and Communication? Ultimately, the station eventually operated under the public relations arm of the school.²⁴

By 1981 Stanley Ware left Oakwood to pursue new academic interests, and the school began to search for a new station manager. Former radio personality and music industry executive Donald L. McPhaull experienced a major spiritual conversion in his life and decided to enter the gospel ministry. Although he had planned to matriculate at Union College in Lincoln, Nebraska, he received the call to Oakwood and subsequently followed the prompting of the Holy Spirit to go to Huntsville, Alabama.²⁵ McPhaull's skills and experience in broadcasting ushered in a new era of ministry focus for WOCG. His new morning drive-time show *Morning Joy* began at 6:00 a.m. with a blend of inspirational and contemporary Christian music, news, and sports. Programming changes also included shows called the *Midday Praise Report*, *Afternoon Classics*, *Evening Praises*, and the afternoon drive-time program, *Evensong*. McPhaull singlehandedly operated the thriving 25,000-kilowatt (kW) station primarily with the help of untrained student workers and volunteers. During those years the earlier student engineers had graduated, so the station contracted help in the form of a local engineer named Henry Hoffman. Hoffman faithfully served the station for many years until his retirement.

Throughout the 1980s McPhaull nurtured the station and the students who trained there. The introduction of the Sharathon fund-raiser began during the McPhaull years, and thousands of dollars were raised to support the mission of WOCG. Several of the students who were groomed under his tutelage went on to manage WOCG and continued in broadcasting and communication-related fields. These include David T. Person II, Hallerin H. Hill, Carmela Monk-Crawford, Charles "Skip" Cheatham, Linda R. Anderson, and Victoria L. Joiner. These and others who worked under McPhaull learned a level of professionalism and skill that remain today.

Hallerin H. Hill, the third general manager, had the distinction of being the youngest GM in the Adventist Radio Network. To his advantage, Hill had worked as a teen at a local Christian radio station before he started college at Oakwood.²⁶ Hill's energy and professionalism took the radio station to new heights in the local ratings. *Morning Joy* broke into the Top 10 local morning drive-time race.²⁷ With Hallerin Hill as the host, Linda Anderson as the newscaster and the first program director, and Tony Gomez on sports, the sound of the station truly exemplified excellence in Christian radio, as was proclaimed each day on 90.1 FM.

David T. Person II became the fourth GM in 1989 and began introducing more community-focused programming. The program *Second Chance*, with Kenneth Anderson, became a mainstay of local public affairs broadcasting and remains on the air each Sunday afternoon. Person's contributions to training news and public affairs announcers helped to launch the careers of veteran broadcasters such as Kym Richardson-Anderson, Jody Jones, Ernest "Trey Thomas" Murphy, Dana Winston, Brennan Wimbish, and Elizabeth Anderson. Under Person's management Victoria L. Joiner became the second program director, the station grew, and students received great instruction in radio broadcasting.

General manager from 1992, Victoria Joiner eventually became the longest serving manager of the station. For more than 24 years Joiner led the station to higher levels of growth and service to the community. With the help of the third program director, Jody L. Jones, the station reached new heights and such major milestones as:

24-hour broadcasting in 1994

music-intensive programming from "Dayparting"

New 10 kW transmitter and generator purchased

Office expansion/station renovation

Station automation workstations and software upgrades

Worldwide Internet access expansion in 1998

Largest station fund-raisers

Expansion of staff to include office manager, chief engineer, underwriting director

New station constructed in 2004 and growth from two to five studios

Most important, the work of instructing hundreds of students in radio broadcasting continued. Several returned to work full-time at the station as production and music directors or in underwriting and promotions. These included Dana Winston, Angela Vega Johnson, Brennan Wimbish, Audree Johnson, and Dammeon Malone. These dedicated workers became an important part of the ministry of WOCG/WJOU over the years.

Numerous volunteers made a tremendous difference and brought their gifts and talents to the station. The longest-serving volunteers include T. Marshall Kelly, who has been on the air since the beginning of station operations. Other on-air volunteers include Kenneth Anderson, Ivy J. Starks, Anthonye Perkins, Debra Millet, Milton Cartwright, Jr., James Lathon, Ruth Warren, Hugh Wilson, Chester Mack, and the beloved host of *Evening Melodies* each Friday night, William "Uncle Bill" Evans. Many others gave of their time, talents, and gifts and made the radio station what it is today.

In 2008 Oakwood College became Oakwood University, and not only did the school have a name change, but the radio station also changed call letters to reflect this momentous occasion. Thus, WJOU was chosen to reflect the "Joy" in sharing Jesus' love and in becoming Oakwood University.

In 2014 Victoria Joiner relinquished the reigns of WJOU to enter the classroom full-time as a professor of communication at Oakwood University. Dammeon Malone singlehandedly stepped in to manage and maintain station operations until a new general manager was chosen.

In 2015 Reginald Hicks became general manager. With his rich background in fund-raising and development at several college campus radio stations in the Atlanta, Georgia, area, Hicks' leadership created an even more community-inclusive atmosphere, with live remotes at special events, community angel tree and book drives, and the highly successful Community Health Fair. With more than 70 vendors acquired through the hard work of Ron Gilbert, current underwriting director, the community health fair highlights Oakwood University's commitment to the healthy campus 20/20 campaign and sharing the health message with those around us.

Today the future of WJOU looks bright. In the fall of 2017 new leadership was installed in the person of Audree Johnson, a product of WOCG/WJOU. Johnson brings a wealth of business and broadcasting experience, and as the new general manager, she is committed to the ministry focus and to the mission of training future broadcasters who will touch the world.²⁸

There were many slogans and identifiers for the station over the years—from *The Best in Music and the Spoken Word*, *Excellence in Christian Radio*, and *The Light of the Tennessee Valley* to the current *Praise 90.1 FM*. But one true theme has been the mission of the station: to share the love of Jesus and the three angels' messages with all the world. Since 1979 Oakwood University Radio WJOU has proclaimed this good news through its music and many amazing programs. Hundreds of young people have received training in broadcasting, and many continue not only to have employment opportunities in some of the most respected media outlets but also to give of their time and talent with their own radio and television productions. Countless lives have been touched by this ministry as the praises go up from *Praise 90.1 FM* WJOU.

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