

Inspiration, perspiration

A radio station gets the Word out from a stuffy, minuscule mobile home in Zephyrhills. No one's complaining.

By EBONY WINDOM
Published May 29, 2004

ZEPHYRHILLS - When Greg First started in radio, vinyl was all the rage. Back then, he was a slick DJ known ironically as the Shy Guy. The Beatles and Rolling Stones were in heavy rotation.

Now, with 30 years under his belt, First is still at it. He can be heard on the Switch 96.7 FM, a low-power Christian hit station. First's secular days have passed. Now he's a part of a radio ministry where folks can hear Christian tunes and offer testimony.

It's all for the glory of God, says First, who lives in Dade City.

It all started with some quick thinking. Last December, Chris Lash, 39, snapped up a radio license that was set to expire. He knew what to do. Lash operates a Christian station of the same name in Pennsylvania and wanted to expand. Within a week, the Switch was up and running.

Nearly six months later, it's going strong. It's the first and only FM radio station in Zephyrhills, says Jay Heilman Jr., who handles public relations.

The three volunteer staffers operate from a tiny mobile home in Zephyrhills. There's no bathroom in the 100-square-foot building. And because it's equipped with only 110 volts of electricity, air conditioning is out of the question.

But folks here aren't complaining.

First, 54, keeps things in perspective.

"It's not about us," he said. "It's a ministry, and everybody wants to see us succeed. If God is behind this project, the sky is the limit."

They rely on the backing of local businesses to help keep the station afloat. For \$100, businesses sign on as underwriters in exchange for 100 30-second commercials per month. Word of Faith Worship Center in Zephyrhills buys 30-minute blocks of air time to broadcast weekly worship services.

Still, the station is losing money, says Lash, who oversees operations from his home in Pennsylvania. He looks to listeners for donations, too. So far, the station has not received any. But they remain hopeful.

"I understand," Lash says. "We're brand-new. People are warming up to us."

Soon, the Switch will kick it up a notch.

A few syndicated Christian radio shows are slated to begin. There's the morning talk show Marcia and Jeff, and an evening program, Total Axxess, which features interviews with big-name Christian artists.

But the biggest draw is the station's local programming. Folks tune in for Saturday Night on the Switch and Late Night Live. Many times, more than a dozen people cram into the station to be a part of it.

It's a lively atmosphere. During Saturday Night, hosts Heilman, 23, and First are a good pair.

For Heilman, it's a learning experience. He's the rookie; First is the veteran. The duo tries to keep it fun. They interview local artists, take requests and chat with callers. Sometimes, they pass the mike around the room for shout outs. The local pizza joint delivers a couple of free pies.

Frankie Ammons, who hosts Late Night, offers an unusual blend of tunes. From 10 p.m. to 2 a.m., folks can hear Christian hip-hop and heavy metal.

In the fall, they'll broadcast Zephyrhills High School football games live from the press box. The Switch is deeply rooted in the community, Lash says.

"So many radio stations are owned by big corporations," says Lash, president of Godstock Ministries, which operates the Switch. "They lose the localism. We want to be as local as possible."

The Switch is broadcast 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Most of the 800 songs on the play list are automated. The station targets listeners ages 18 to 45, but Heilman is quick to note that they attract listeners of all ages. A computer cranks out tunes by popular Christian artists such as the Newsboys, Kirk Franklin and Third Day. An antenna atop a nearby tower transmits the signal to most of Zephyrhills and parts of Dade City. Saturday is the only time it goes live. The station could almost run itself.

But the radio staff has seen its share of bloopers. One time, during Saturday Night, someone left the microphone on. The hosts exchanged personal testimonies, not knowing that their conversation was on air. Finally, a caller tipped them off.

Another time, the control board went out. There was dead air. Someone scrambled to Radio Shack and grabbed a new one. Within a few hours, the station was back on.

"Satan likes to get into the equipment sometimes," First said. "But we always overcome."

Soon, the station hopes to get new digs. Staffers are looking at an 800-square-foot office on U.S. 301 just outside Zephyrhills. The new station will be equipped with a soundproof booth and backup equipment. It would offer guests room to get comfy. It will have air conditioning, too. When listeners got wind of the potential move, they offered to pitch in. One man offered to install an alarm system free of charge. Another will donate office furniture.

First hoped to be in the new station by early June, but technical and financial factors have delayed it.

For now, the Switch will stay put. The station on Pate Road is no palace, but to the staff here, it's still a blessing. They're using music to inspire others, Heilman says.

When it gets hot, they plug in the oscillating fan. Sometimes they leave the door open.

"It's amazing what doors God opens for you," Heilman said. "We've been blessed."

At a glance

Saturday Night on the Switch airs from 7 to 10 p.m. Saturdays, followed by Late Night Live from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. For information, visit www.theswitch.fm