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A new radio station with an old call sign

By Sylvia O'Hagan

A radio station, whose call letters originally stood for Dobbs Ferry High, has made a long journey back home to a new studio on the campus of Mercy College. WDFH.FM, an independent, noncommercial community FM radio station, had a weekend of on-air celebrations and guests Oct. 10-13 to commemorate the station's much-anticipated resumption of live broadcasts, a programming/teaching affiliation with the college and its new on-campus studio.

Festivities included a ribbon-cutting ceremony and live music programming with studio guests David Goldman, who recently released his critically acclaimed recording "Summer with Juliet," the Tony Rivera Band and The Almost Original Synthetic Swampgrass Jug Band.

The station began its live broadcasting from Mercy College on Sept. 2 featuring 24-hour live, original, community-based programming (including news and public affairs) and a "free-form" mix of music including progressive and alternative rock, folk, blues and jazz. WDFH.FM can be heard in Ossining, where its transmitter is located, as well as in nearby communities in Westchester and Rockland counties on 90.3 on the FM dial, as well as worldwide through the station's website — www.wdfh.org.

The station can be heard at Mercy College's White Plains and Yorktown campuses, but not in Dobbs Ferry because of the location of the transmitter (though the staff are working to fix this situation).

Committed to being a forum for community news, WDFH.FM has covered everything from politics (including full-length coverage of debates at the local, county, state and federal levels) to art gallery openings and musical performances. As the station is fully staffed with students and volunteers, it will commence taking requests for public service announcements from local nonprofit organizations — which can be sent to psa@wdfh.org with three weeks' notice of events.

Though the station is officially on air, the studio setup is not complete,



MIKE DISCIULLO/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

Marc Sophos and Cooper Vargas in the WDFH studio

according to Marc Sophos, WDFH.FM's executive director and an assistant professor of radio at Mercy College.

"When the studios are completed — a year or so from now — there will be three studios equipped for music and documentary program production, plus a fourth studio designed to serve as a newsroom and news production studio," Sophos explained. "As part of the construction process, we have also installed wiring for computer connectivity and, as our budget and donations of computer equipment permit, we will be installing digital editing and production facilities...allowing us to use, and teach, traditional studio techniques as well as new digital technology."

Sophos noted that while "college radio" is fairly common nationwide, it is a rarity in the New York metropolitan area as the radio dial is so crowded with existing stations.

"The alliance with WDFH puts Mercy College in the unique position as the only four-year college in Westchester to have a licensed FM station on campus," said Sophos.

WDFH will provide select internships to students from Mercy College's Journalism and Media department. Sophos believes that the alliance with a legitimate, licensed FM station based on campus will attract students to the college's communications programs. Louis Grasso, program director of the Journalism and Media Program at Mercy College agrees.

"The alliance between WDFH-FM and Mercy College will offer students invaluable opportunities to study radio in a real, on-air radio station environment," said Grasso. "It is something many other colleges cannot offer."

Internships for credit are available through Mercy's journalism and media program. Internships can also be taken as specialized or open electives through the television production program. Students from other major programs at Mercy College can intern at WDFH as well, though not for credit. Such is the case for Khadiyyah Muhammad, who is a station volunteer. Khadiyyah, a 24-year-old accounting major from Yonkers, wants to "help out in whatever

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way I can."

"I love music, all types," explained Khadijah. "I wanted to get involved for the music, and to learn what goes on behind the scenes at a radio station, which is interesting."

WDFH.FM offers volunteer opportunities for students, staff, faculty and administration, as well as the community at large. "WDFH-FM is actively seeking volunteers," said Sophos. "We are looking for people with a commitment to local, noncommercial, community-based radio...there is a peculiar spark that drives people to volunteer in community radio." The station is looking for people with interest in music,

and/or public affairs and there are other areas where help is needed, including promotion, public service and website development.

Sophos notes that besides the work, there is a lot of fun to be had at WDFH.FM. "We're not just building a radio station; we are creating a community of people, ideas, tastes, and passions, and that can be an exhilarating experience," Sophos explained. "The station is very much like community theater in that way — we work hard toward a common goal, and out of that hard work come benefits we really might not have expected — like great friendships."

Sophos, a Dobbs Ferry native who grew up in the Brookside Lane house where his parents have lived since 1960, finds the affiliation with Mercy College and WDFH.FM's live broadcasting in its new Dobbs Ferry "home" very satis-

fying — and "comically ironic."

WDFH.FM, which has been his mission for about 35 years, had its humble beginnings through a \$5 transmitter manned at home by Sophos, and neighborhood friends, when he was only 10 years old. As a DFHS ninth-grader, Sophos approached the school administrators with the idea of starting a school radio station. After more than a year of meetings, research and the enthusiastic support and help of faculty advisers, including the principal, money was allocated for the station. Unfortunately, the school station never materialized because of technical difficulties and a crowded airwave, so Sophos continued to transmit from his home. At one point in the station's history, the expansion of cable TV technology made it possible for Sophos to hook up his transmission with the local cable

company, and 11,000 cable subscribers in Ardsley, Dobbs Ferry, Irvington, Greenburgh, Hartsdale and Elmsford could listen to WDFH.FM while watching their government access bulletin board. After the FCC granted WDFH.FM its FM license in 1992, facilities were set up in Ossining, only to close months later due to leasing disputes. So as to not risk going off the air and thus lose its license, the station continued to broadcast taped programming. Sophos approached Mercy College in 2000 with the idea of an on-campus studio affiliation.

"It does not go too far to say that it is wildly exciting to finally have a good, stable home for WDFH.FM," said Sophos after an exhausting weekend of festivities for the radio station that's been his life's work. "It's great to be back in Dobbs Ferry."