**Small town radio station fights back**

**Dripping Springs' KDRP says giants step on signal**

DRIPPING SPRINGS, Texas (KXAN) - On a recent Sunday morning, a Dripping Springs area resident was listening to a church service on [KDRP](http://www.kdrplive.org/) , the town's small, nonprofit community radio station. Suddenly, the signal grew weak and the listener heard interference from another station. That station was [KVET](http://www.kvet.com/main.html) radio, which broadcasts a sports-talk format and, according to [KDRP](http://www.kdrplive.org/) management, occasionally runs commercials for adult-oriented businesses. So, right in the middle of the Sunday sermon, the listener encountered an offending ad. He complained to the church and the pastor complained to KDRP general manager Ryan Schuh.

"To the average listener, they don't understand," Schuh said. "They might think we changed formats; they might think we started doing that. They don't know; they get upset and go away."

"The largest religious broadcaster in the nation, religious, is broadcasting adult entertainment ads, breast augmentation contest ads, lewd humor constantly," said KDRP operations manager Denver O'Neal. "Is that Christian behavior?"

"And how do we get those listeners back?" asked Schuh.

Perhaps an even better question is, why was KVET showing up on KDRP's frequency in the first place?

The answer lies in the labyrinth that is the Federal Communications Commission rule book. Under the rules, Educational Media Foundation (EMF) , a nationwide corporation that broadcasts Christian programming on hundreds of stations, was able to lease space on one of its antennas to Clear Channel Radio , another nationwide broadcaster with hundreds of stations of its own.

According to Joe Miller, vice-president for signal development for EMF, the deal involved a swap of some HD radio signals with Clear Channel, a commercial radio company. In the process, with FCC approval, the antenna was moved from a tower near San Marcos, to one near the Buda/Kyle area, much closer to Dripping Springs. Both stations operate at 103.1 FM and with only 15 miles now separating their towers, the stronger EMF antenna appears to be causing interference for KDRP listeners in the south and southeast portions of the station's coverage area. According to KDRP management, that knocks out about a fourth of the station's potential audience.

The Dripping Springs people filed a complaint with the FCC and that got the attention of EMF.

"FCC rules are very clear; we cannot interfere with their signal," said Miller. "We take our responsibility very seriously and we are willing to work through this with them."

But EMF's partner in the deal, Clear Channel, was far less conciliatory. The company issued a statement saying, in part, "This is much ado about nothing. As KDRP-LP well knows, the translator is in complete compliance with the FCC's rules which were established specifically to eliminate these kids of disputes.

"Simply stated," the release continued, "KDRP-LP is seeking to claim rights to coverage which is outside their FCC protected area."

At the Dripping Springs station, Schuh flatly denied that. He took a reporter to a location just a few miles outside of town, well within, he insisted, the coverage area, and by driving just a few feet back and forth, he could make his car radio pick up first KDRP and then KVET.

"We even told them ahead of time," Schuh said, "You're going to have an interference problem, and they said, 'No. If it happens, call us.'"

Schuh said the station did call them, but was virtually ignored, forcing it to seek relief from the federal agency.

"It's time consuming; it's distracting; it costs money that we don't have," said Daryl O'Neal, a commercial radio veteran who is now volunteering at KDRP. "Why do we have to do that while the largest religious broadcaster in the nation and the largest commercial broadcaster in the nation decide that they need to run sports on another station in Austin? Why?"

Both EMF and Clear Channel pointed out that KDRP also broadcasts over 100.1 FM, which has a stronger signal than 103.1, suggesting that KDRP listeners inconvenienced by the interference could simply listen to the station on that frequency. But Schuh said that's not an option.

"We do not own 100.1; that is not our radio station at all," he said. "That's owned by a third party who enjoys our programming and he chooses to rebroadcast us, but he can turn it off at any time. Our signal, the one that we own and must protect is the 103.1. That's our bread and butter; that's what makes the community tune in."

And the community does, indeed, tune in. Besides the Sunday church services, KDRP offers up community forums, opportunities for the mayor and the school superintendent to communicate with citizens, even debates come election time. Then there's the local sports programs.

"At the end of a Saturday afternoon," said Schuh, "after broadcasting seven or eight Little League football games, at the end of a broadcast, having a parent come up and say, 'Thank you, thank you so much for providing that because our family members who are out of town or out of state

were able to hear that,' to me, that's it; that's what makes it so special."

The station even video tapes some of the games and runs them on its website.

"For a great-grandfather or a grandfather to watch their little grandson, a thousand miles away, run across and score a touchdown, and then hear from that person a thank you, it makes all of that hard work seem like it was nothing," said Denver O'Neal. "We had a parent in Afghanistan, a civilian contractor, watch his son's football game, all the way from out there. We even had an uncle watch from China."

There's also the beginnings of a news department, sort of.

"You know, we moved to this location and one of the neat things is we can always hear when the fire trucks are going by," said Denver O'Neal. "The other day, I called up and asked, 'Is there something that we need to get out to the public?'"

The fire department official said there was an accident on the highway and KDRP put the information on the air.

Then, there are the dinosaurs, people like Larry Monroe, who worked at KUT, Austin's public radio station for almost 30 years before being forced out amid significant programming changes. Now Monroe airs his KUT signature shows, "Blue Monday" and "The Phil Music Show" on KDRP. Sammy Allred, the controversial, but popular, long time on-air personality at KVET before he was let go after uttering a profanity on the air, stops by most Wednesday mornings to chat with Mary Margaret, Bodie and Frances Ann, on KDRP's "Coffee with the Kyle Sisters " program.

"A lot of people don't understand the history behind Sammy Allred," Daryl O'Neal said. "They remember him from radio, but man, the guy's a country music legend. And he gets to come out here and talk about what he wants to talk about.

"When you have guys like Larry Monroe or Sammy Allred, I mean, these guys are legends that I'm a huge fan of. Why I started in radio was to hang out with guys like Larry Monroe. And so to be able to put together a radio station where our heroes come out here and hang out with us is just incredible.

"Part of the mission was freedom," Daryl O'Neal added. "You know, we've all been shackled by commercial broadcasters for years and years and years and we don't make any money doing this, I promise you. It's about freedom to express ourselves and for the public to express themselves. If someone wants to come in here and talk about farming naturally, talk about farming naturally. If they want to come out here and talk about, you know, I'm a liberal; I'm a conservative; I love Jesus; this is the place to do it, man. You know, it's your radio station.

"It's been fun to innovate because we can truly create great content you wouldn't hear anywhere else. And since we don't have the shackles of the bank telling us what to play, sometimes it gets a little trippy, but it's entertaining and that's what this is about."

Daryl O'Neal, who is operations manager Denver O'Neal's father, is passionate about the station's mission and about the argument with EMF and Clear Channel.

"What have we done to them?" he asked. "Nothing. I don't think we count. But we count to the people in this neighborhood," he said as tears welled in his eyes.

"We've had a lot of broadcasters come to us and say, 'We wish we could do what you do, but we just can't.' So we think that part of it comes from jealousy and part of it comes from greed.

"The two companies that are involved with this together, within a 100-mile radius, probably own 30 to 40 radio stations. We're out here in the Hill Country, running a little non-for-profit radio station, not bothering anybody, just playing great music and Little League football. Why do they need this one?   
  
"There's an indifference to community radio. Indifference is the worst thing in the world. Love me: I know what that means. Hate me: I understand that. But indifferent, that's terrible, to say we don't count; the 17 volunteers here don't count."

His son sounds more optimistic.

"Challenges can always bring you down," he admitted, "but there's always a light at the end of the tunnel and, you know, when the darkness is around, that's when the light shines the brightest."

So what comes next? Well, the FCC will eventually have to sort all this out.

Stay tuned.

By Jim Swift