

GRANTS IN ACTION



Photo by Cheryl Senter

IN THE STUDIO New Hampshire Public Television President and CEO Peter Frid.

INNOVATING TO SURVIVE

New Hampshire Public Television has had a rough couple of years. But NHPTV took some risks and is now a national model for innovation and sustainability.

By Lois Shea

In 2011, New Hampshire Public Television took a huge hit. The station, which had been on the air for more than 50 years, lost all of its state funding — 31 percent of its total budget — during a round of deep state budget cuts.

The question that faced NHPTV President and CEO Peter Frid was: “How do you absorb the loss of \$2.7 million overnight?”

There would be no simple solutions, and certainly no easy ones.

“Then, the next question was: how do you build a sustainable model?” Frid said.

Over the next two years, NHPTV transformed itself in ways that are now being looked at as a model of innovation and sustainability.

Its governing structure, business model and operations have changed. It has entered into an innovative collaboration with

WGBH in Boston, and secured new funding. Its broadcast license is no longer held by the University System of New Hampshire, making the station entirely supported by the community.

Some of the change, said Frid, was already in the works before the budget cuts. But, he said, “the loss of state funding really accelerated the pace of change.”

Some of that change was extremely difficult. Twenty staff positions — 40 percent of the station’s total — were cut. Salaries were reduced. Production of the popular “Granite State Challenge” and of “NH Outlook” were put on pause.

The New Hampshire Charitable Foundation granted \$25,000 to NHPTV to help the station secure a Corporation for Public Broadcasting grant of \$200,000 to help in the restructuring process.

Now, after five decades of “friendly competition,” NHPTV and WGBH are collaborators.

“WGBH is one of the largest and oldest stations in the country,” Frid said. “Joining their scale” meant significant cost savings.

One major saving came in infrastructure. The master control for both stations is now being handled in Boston, with consultation from NHPTV. Master control is a “very capital intensive” part of any station’s operations, Frid said — requiring a \$1.5 million investment every five years. The new arrangement saves NHPTV \$300,000 annually.

Recent advances in technology made such collaboration possible.

“If this had happened 10 or 15 years ago, I don’t think we would have survived,” Frid said.

“Producing programs specifically focused on meeting New Hampshire’s needs — that’s why we’re here.” –Peter Frid

NHPTV has shifted membership systems, data processing and payroll to WGBH. Both stations remain independent nonprofits.

“We’ve built a sustainable business model,” Frid said.

“Granite State Challenge” has been resuscitated with private funding. NHPTV has doubled its number of sustaining members. The stations have coordinated fund drives.

The Foundation made an additional \$25,000 operating grant to NHPTV last year, critical support as the station continues to stabilize operations.

NHPTV is looking to bring back “NH Outlook” and produce more New Hampshire-specific programming, and expand community outreach.

“Producing programs specifically focused on meeting New Hampshire’s needs — that’s why we’re here,” Frid said.

Deborah Schachter, a senior program officer at the Foundation, points to a recent program about bullying as the kind of programming at which NHPTV excels.

“NHPTV is focused on learning in a time when so many media outlets are focused on sensationalism and ratings and on other things that don’t feed the public understanding in the same rich way,” Schachter said.

“The Foundation, as one of the central components of our vision, is committed to civic engagement,” Schachter said. “And one of the critical components of people being engaged in civic life is to be informed. Public television is a resource that helps



BRYN BURNS makes her case at “Pitch Camp.”

Bryn Burns took the plunge.

She brought her pitch about New Hampshire Public Television to the Entrepreneurs Foundation of New Hampshire’s “Pitch Camp.”

Burns, NHPTV’s manager of corporate support and community relationships, had three minutes to make her pitch.

She talked about how the station had lost 31 percent of its funding and had to make severe adjustments, about how NHPTV had kept from going under.

One evaluator, said Burns, was particularly blunt: “I hated everything about it.”

Another pointed out that Burns was pitching public television and had not mentioned “Downton Abbey” or Ken Burns.

“Everything they brought up was spot-on,” she said. She went back and revised.

Now, she has a pitch that works. (She has proof in the form of support from corporate funders who have heard it.) The new pitch is about moving forward with the combined forces of WGBH and NHPTV, about local programming coming back, about the educational power of public television.

And it always includes four magic words: Ken Burns. “Downton Abbey.”

connect people and inform them.”

Frid hopes that NHPTV’s experience will help other public television stations — and other nonprofits — look at different business models and implement changes from a position of strength.

“How might you be able to take the skills you have and aggregate resources?” Frid asks. “Do you really need all the infrastructure that is behind you?” ■

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