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Executive Profile

Kevin Klose, President and CEO of NPR

Published in *More Things Considered*, a KPBS newsletter

If you're a regular National Public Radio (NPR) listener, chances are you've heard of Kevin Klose. As the president and CEO of NPR, Klose heads up America's premier non-profit news and cultural radio programming service, with more than 730 stations and a weekly audience of nearly 22 million listeners nationwide. Klose, who joined NPR in 1998, has a very impressive background including 20 years at the venerable Washington Post and stints as Director of U.S. International Broadcasting and President of Radio Free Europe.

But it's not just his credentials that make him the right person to lead NPR, it's because he gets it. Klose understands that in a country filled with acerbic, right wing talk radio hosts and cloned radio stations owned by large corporations, NPR is an anomaly. Nowhere else is there a radio service that offers balanced, informed news reporting as well as original, thought-provoking programming that features cultural diversity. NPR has managed to preserve the essence of what radio was when it was one of the most popular forms of entertainment 60 years ago. And Klose is hell-bent on preserving NPR.

"After my selection as the next CEO [of NPR] had been announced, the response came to me from all across the country, from people I had known in my nearly 40 years in journalism, and also from people I had never met and didn't know at all, who virtually uniformly either wrote email, notes or even in some cases made phone calls to ask me to protect it, preserve it and strengthen it," Klose recalled.

With so many people taking such a keen interest in the fate of NPR, Klose concluded that he was not just dealing with a public service, but also a national treasure. This continued to prove true as he watched the audience level rise. In fact, according to Arbitron, since Klose took the reins at NPR the national audience has gone from 13 million listeners a week to about 22 million. Although he defers the credit away from himself, it is clear that he's doing something right.

"First of all, we do something which nobody else in broadcast journalism and broadcast cultural presentation does in the scope and breadth that we do. We do very high quality presentation of news and we do an enormous amount of foreign reporting. And nobody [else] is doing foreign news in broadcast in this country. We're doing things that nobody else is doing and people can't find it anywhere else," Klose explained.

He added that on September 10th, 2001 the NPR audience was at 16 million listeners. After the first measurable moment on September 12th of that year, the audience numbers had risen to 20 million. Clearly NPR was, and still is, the news source that many Americans feel offers the most comprehensive and balanced information.

Because NPR offers the points of view of all sides, it is no surprise that there is a healthy representation of GLBT related programming available. For example, shows like Morning Edition, Talk of the Nation, Day to Day, Fresh Air and All Things Considered have each, at one time or another featured a story, a topic or a guest that was relevant to the GLBT community. This year alone Talk of the Nation discussed the Supreme Court's decision to repeal sodomy laws and the election of an openly gay bishop to the New Hampshire Episcopal Diocese.

Klose recalled a five-part series on homophobia that NPR featured two years ago. To him, the issue isn't whether or not the opinions in the story are liberal, conservative or somewhere in between. His primary concern is offering subject matter that deals with our daily lives and gives us cause to start a conversation or to think about a different point of view. Klose also pointed out a remarkable piece done on Morning Edition that dealt with the Roe v. Wade decision and how it affected two women in particular.

"One had started out as pro-life and the other started out as pro-choice and they explained how, in the course of Roe v. Wade, in those 30 years, their positions had [reversed]. What it was in their lives, what factors, what events, what psychologies, what ethical and moral senses they had, what they were doing as individuals in which they basically exchanged their views. The one who was pro-life became pro-choice and the other way around. It was a fascinating presentation of the realities of life making none of the assumptions people make about the usual conventional wisdom about these things. I thought it was extraordinary," Klose said.

Klose reiterated how programming like this isn't found anywhere else and, to include all points of view, no particular agenda was pushed during the course of the story. It is examples like this that give Klose the most pleasure when discussing the merits of NPR. He finds it curious that NPR is often tagged as having a liberal point of view even though many different opinions and sides are represented in its news stories as well as features. Klose pointed out that if there is an issue that's relevant to society, it's just good journalism to cover that issue, regardless of its relationship to the liberal or conservative agendas.

"If you look at the kinds of people we put on [the radio] from the Bush administration or from members of Congress or from think tanks and faculties around the country there is a huge range of opinions," Klose said.

NPR listeners, Klose believes, are interested in authentic voices and authentic presentations of the American experience, whether at home or abroad. He explains that because public radio stations are community based, community supported and autonomous, in that they are independent from NPR, each station is unique and reflects the needs of its own community. This is unusual in the American broadcast experience and offers listeners much more than stations that get their programming from a huge conglomerate.

"When I think of NPR I don't really think of it as solely just us. I think of it as this extraordinary community of independent stations. I know why people are attracted [to public radio]. Everybody has to be from somewhere. We're not just from some hard drive or an array of hard drives sitting in Cincinnati beaming pre-canned, pre-digested, niched radio streams into a market," Klose explained.

Klose went on to say that public radio listeners tend to be people who are active in their communities, who support community and civic organizations, who believe in neighborhoods and who vote in local elections. These people depend on their local stations for news and programming that pertains to their particular community, and public radio offers such information. And Klose feels that KPBS is an excellent example of that.

"I have a very powerful and positive working relationship with KPBS on the radio side," he said. "Doug Myrland and others are just wonderful there."