

Conversation with Diane Weaver Dunne

‘Everything we broadcast is human narration’

By Suzanne McLaughlin

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Diane Weaver Dunne, a former journalist, has been executive director of the nonprofit CRIS Radio for nine years, which provides audio radio recordings to people who are unable to read on their own, for whatever reason. CRIS Radio (Connecticut Radio Information System), which broadcasts out of Windsor, is able to offer its services through the efforts of 200 volunteers who come in every week and read aloud. Dunne said CRIS Radio has a nice collaborative atmosphere.

Q: It's nice to meet you.

A: Would you like to walk around and see the place?

Q: I would.

A: CRIS Radio is 41 years old. We're a 5013c nonprofit. Our mission is to provide high quality electronic versions of print materials for people who are unable to read. That includes people who are blind, have dyslexia, Parkinson's, people who cannot turn a page, cerebral palsy, anyone who has print challenges.

Q: As people get older they may tend to develop challenges, right? Even if they're not technically blind.

A: There are various low-vision issues that are more common. Also, with intellectual declines like dementia or stroke, people may have trouble decoding words. For 30 years, CRIS Radio has been broadcasting throughout the state. We start with a 30-minute sports program in the morning. We have five other regional studios, and this is the broadcast center, here in Windsor. Other stations throughout the state loan us their sub-carrier frequencies, the equivalent of their breakdown lane. Originally, people used transistor radios. Now, we also are available streaming on the Internet. We go live at 7:30 in the morning with sports. From 8 to 9 we do two newspapers, the Hartford Courant and the New York Times. In the afternoon we record the Journal Inquirer and sometimes the New Britain Herald. We also record USA Today live. We also record from 50 other newspapers and magazines throughout the week. Those are thrown into our lineup. We also do children's

magazines and Spanish language publications. There is CRIS Radio in English, CRIS Radio in Spanish and CRIS Kids on different channels. CRIS Kids has two streams, one for older kids and one for very young kids.

Q: You use a lot of volunteers for the recording?

A: We have about 200 volunteers. They are our voice talent. Everything is scripted for them. All our recordings are digital, state of the art. We are open during the week from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. and on the weekends in the mornings.

Q: You have somebody coordinating all of these volunteer readers?

A: Our office director coordinates them. We have four full-time people and three part-time people and some contracted people. We create about 14 hours of new content every day.

Q: That's amazing.

A: It really is amazing. This really and truly is a community-driven and volunteer-driven organization. Without our volunteers, this wouldn't happen. We have two anchors who record the one-hour morning show. It's because your voice starts to get tired after half an hour. Most people record for around a half an hour. Maybe some can do a little more, but not a ton more. Your voice gets scratchy and tired.

Q: Are the anchors paid people?

A: Nobody is paid. All of our readers audition. There are people who have amazing voices and have never been voice-over professionals. We do have voice-over professionals who volunteer and some professional journalists. We have radio and TV people who volunteer with us. We have Steve Parker from WTIC. He does a live program once a week for us. Steve just celebrated 35 years with CRIS Radio as a volunteer.

Q: This is people's way to volunteer.

A: It is. Some are highly talented. Because of technology, some volunteers now record at home or in another studio. They send it to us. They introduce themselves: 'I am Diane Weaver Dunne, I am a CRIS Radio volunteer and today I'm reading the front pages of The New York Times' or whatever it is. All of the recordings are then available as podcasts on demand. We also stream it and broadcast it. We have a mobile app for the podcasts. There is a



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modest fee of \$30 a year for unlimited downloads. Go to crisradio.org and it is available on demand. We can try it and see what is being read right now.

Q: It sounds like they are reading obituaries.

A: We get calls within minutes if the stream goes off. This is where we do live programs.

This is our master studio. The two live anchors take turns alternating reading in the one-hour program. There is a window between the two live anchors. The mics are switched on and off. The Lions Clubs have been supporting us as a civic organization since we started 41 years ago. They donate between \$35,000 to \$42,000 a year, statewide.

This is our radio warehouse. These are our old-fashioned broadcast radios. You will be able to pick up reception from a typical house or yard. They use the side band frequencies from radio stations in the state.

Q: These are the radios you give people?

A: We give them free of charge. We serve people from kindergarten up to 90 something years old. Some people know how to use Alexa. Some people want an old-fashioned radio with an antenna. We stream our children's

magazines. Kids don't listen to the radio. But older adults and elderly adults listen to the radio.

Q: I listen to the radio when I'm in the car.

A: The radio is huge in the car. We also have Internet radios tuned to English and Spanish. Do you have an iPhone?

Q: Yes.

A: That is voice activated. For people who are blind, they can find what they need. We have an increasing number of people asking for Alexa. It's all hands free. It can dial phones for you. It's awesome.

Q: Who uses CRIS Kids?

A: Primarily, it is used by schools for kids with disabilities. Connecticut Children's Medical Center also has our CRIS Kids streams in each patient room.

Q: What about an elderly person who finds himself in a nursing home?

A: We're in 115 nursing homes with Internet radios in common areas or if a person is bed bound we will provide an Internet radio for the room. We need IT assistance, however. We also stream to some group homes and to St. Francis