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UP TO THE TASK

By *KYLE MACMILLAN* For *Sun-Times Media* January 20, 2014 Publication: *Chicago Sun-Times (IL)* Page: 24 Word Count: 672

Six years into his tenure as a producer and on-air host at WFMT-FM (98.7), David Polk was not looking for a promotion. But one found him anyway.

Earlier this month, he took over as program director of the Chicago-based classical-music station, replacing longtime on-air voice Peter van de Graaff, who moved into the reinstated chief announcer position.

“It came as a surprise to me,” Polk said. “I was asked to consider it a few months ago, and I thought a lot about it, because I really love producing radio and hosting live programs and the program director position is very much a management position.”

But there is a tradition at WFMT of the program director maintaining a hand in production and hosting, which made accepting his new challenge easier.

At age 30, Polk might seem unusually young for such a senior post, but Polk was quick to point out that the station’s much-esteemed past program director Norman Pellegrini was 28 when he assumed the position.

“I understand that people will be getting used to the fact of having a younger program director,” he said. “But in the arts world and in other industries, it’s not unusual have to have someone my age as a manager.”

Polk’s new duties include developing programming, overseeing a staff of 10 full-time announcers and producers plus additional part-timers and freelancers, and managing the complex day-to-day flow of the station’s live broadcasts and recorded music.

“I kind of call it air-traffic control — almost literally,” Polk said. “At WFMT, we have so many live programs and special programming events that it’s a lot to keep track of.”

Music has been a part of the radio professional’s life since he was a child.

After beginning with piano lessons, he shifted to the trumpet, joining in every possible ensemble in high school and continuing to play on the side in college. His family lived in Highland Park, so he grew up attending the nationally known Ravinia Festival, which is based there.

When WFMT hired Polk in 2006, a year after his graduation from Tufts University in Medford, Mass., he already had amassed an extensive and varied background. Previous jobs included summer stints at Ravinia starting when he was in high school, an internship at National Public Radio’s popular series “Car Talk,” and another internship with the Orchestre de Paris during his junior year abroad.

Besides serving as the founding producer and host of WFMT's six-year-old weekly series "Introductions," a showcase of the region's top young musicians, he has produced a variety of other programs and reported on the arts in Chicago and internationally.

Before instituting any changes as program director, Polk wants to first learn more about all facets of the station's operations and its relationships with other arts organizations. But it is clear, he said, that the station, which averages 281,000 adult listeners a week, must make itself accessible beyond the airwaves via constantly evolving social-media websites and communication tools.

"We'll continue working on that but also keeping in mind that content is always king," he said.

Unlike stations in other cities that have reduced classical programming or eliminated it all together, WFMT flourished even during the recent recession, and Polk is confident it can remain relevant by capitalizing on new technologies and staying on top of industry trends.

What the station should not do, he said, is try to replicate the static music programming that Internet radio stations or phone apps can provide. What sets WFMT apart, he said, is its ability to connect people to major musical and cultural events in Chicago and beyond, and its knowledgeable on-air staff who are constantly exposing listeners to exciting, unexpected music.

"It's kind of like the original social media," Polk said. "You're listening to another human being on the radio, and it feels like they're sitting next to you in your car or on your nightstand. And this personal connection is something that is going to remain very important to people."

Up to the task

David Polk looks through the archives at WFMT-FM (98.7), where he recently became program director. | cHANDLER WEST/FOR SUN-TIMES MEDIA Chandler West Norman Pellegrini

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