

Hibblen's Familiar Voice Turns to a Different Dial

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Michael Hibblen is packing up his office at University and Asher avenues, from the radio awards on the wall to the antique microphones atop a file cabinet filled with reams of history from Arkansas public radio.

He'll take special care with an old reel-to-reel tape deck he used early in his 34-year radio career, a career that isn't ending, exactly, but evolving into a different corner of public broadcasting.

Hibblen's familiar and distinctive voice is moving to Arkansas PBS at the end of the year, where he'll be senior producer/public affairs director of the former Arkansas Educational Television Network.

The news director of [University of Arkansas at Little Rock](#) campus radio station KUAR is changing course after 14 years there, having submitted his resignation just before Thanksgiving, to be effective on Dec. 30.

From his new perch in Conway, on the edge of another college campus, this time the [University of Central Arkansas](#), he's "looking for new adventures."



"It seemed like an opportunity to do something different, yet still kind of the same. It's still public broadcasting and still journalism-related. I'll be helping to plan their coverage, and exploring all the new avenues they have with digital broadcasting. I'm also hoping to help in packaging some of their great new content."

Working or not, the reel-to-reel will be going with him.

“It’s not working right now, but with a little work it could get going again,” said Hibblen, who got his first radio experience as a [North Little Rock](#) Northeast High School student and spent 12 of his 34 radio years in Miami. “Sometimes I start sounding like an old man, but I’ll show the college students how we did things in the first decade of my career, and I’ll take a reel and put the tape on a splicing block, take razor blades and chop the tape very carefully to make the edit. I want them to appreciate that we didn’t have, you know, an easy undo button.”

Another thing of the past is what you might call payday roulette. “In February 1989 I got my first paying job in radio,” Hibblen said. “At least it was supposed to be paying. All my paychecks bounced and I learned I was working at a dying AM station in [Benton](#). About six months later I got hired at an FM station in [England](#), Arkansas, and since then all my paychecks have been good.”

His first experience at KUAR was as a student at UA Little Rock, where he got his degree after returning from his time in Miami, where his last six years were with the Miami Herald, which had a partnership with a National Public Radio station.

His mentors in Arkansas radio included KUAR station manager Ben Fry, who died of a heart attack at 54 in 2016, and KUAR and KARN veteran Ron Breeding, who died at the same young age two years earlier. Both were lost far too soon, said Hibblen, who is 51.

“I started in radio when I was a junior in high school, and this opportunity with Arkansas PBS is appealing for the last chapter of my career, my last 10 or 15 years.”

One intriguing possibility is helping the educational broadcaster go “beyond what’s on TV itself, to all the options digitally,” Hibblen said, referring specifically to the invaluable streamed coverage of state government and civic affairs events on the ARCAN website, the Arkansas Citizens Access Network. One idea is to condense some of the hours of meetings and legislative hearings into digestible news segments, something like “you might perhaps see shared on social media or YouTube.”

There are also podcast possibilities. “There is one agricultural-related podcast that grant funding has been obtained for,” Hibblen said, and “things are really kind of wide open nowadays.”

He’s excited about joining the network, which has seen its content broadened and transformed since CEO Courtney Pledger took over in 2016. “I’ve got some ideas,” Hibblen said, “and the folks seem really amenable to the fact that I’m coming into this with a different set of eyes.”

The Voice of Experience

Michael Hibblen has been a valuable public radio figure for years in Little Rock, but no one who has heard him could claim he has the classic “golden throat.”

In fact, if he hadn’t gotten into news reporting, he thinks he’d have been drummed out of radio long ago.

Instead, he’s had a memorable 34 years on the air, and the KUAR news director will soon be senior producer/director of public affairs for Arkansas PBS, the educational TV network in Conway. He had never spoken publicly about the meticulous, halting pronunciations and emphasized

consonants in his speech patterns, but he was happy to, especially as he shifts career gears.

“Some people can’t stand how I sound while others like it,” Hibblen said, calling his voice unique enough to be identifiable in a crowd. “I’ve had strangers come up to me after overhearing me in restaurants or bars.”

But at one time, that distinctive voice was a liability. “If I hadn’t shifted to news in 1993 after five years of being a DJ, I probably wouldn’t have lasted much longer in radio,” he said. “At least with news, the content of what I’m saying is more important than the voice itself. I’ve always tried to minimize how much I say and use as much sound as possible in newscasts or when interviewing someone.”

Speech therapy as a child and allergies as an adult have affected his sound, Hibblen said, and a stint in Miami led to him to work on eliminating his Arkansas accent. That, in turn, made him sound like an outsider when he returned, he said.

When Hibblen was in high school in North Little Rock, he got kind advice from Arkansas radio legend Tom Wood, who urged him to find his “most natural voice.” So he had a bit of a shock when a KUAR listener gave him her first opinion of his work.

“When she first moved here and heard me on the air, she assumed I was some kind of high-tech artificial intelligence reading a prepared news script.”