

Countenance

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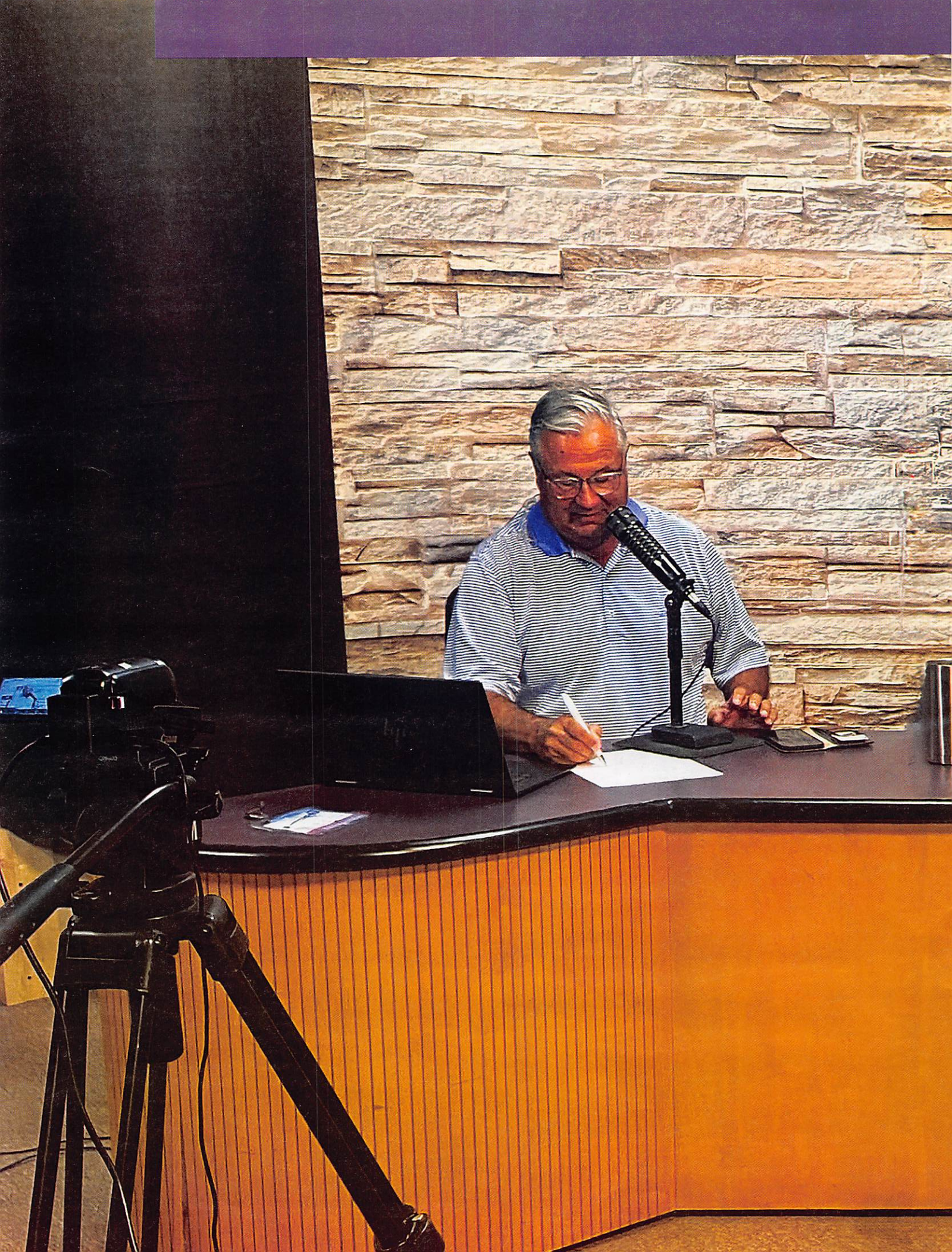
20 ON THE AIR WITH HENRY HINTON

Starting at 15, when he hung out with a friend during her live radio show, to now, as he contemplates retirement from the broadcasting company he founded in Greenville, Henry Hinton's voice has permeated the airwaves through eastern North Carolina.

Story by Demetrius Williams



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by **Demetrius Williams**

ON THE AIR WITH HENRY HINTON: A LOOK BEHIND THE SCENES AT A LIFE IN BROADCASTING

Henry Hinton is recognized by many in Eastern North Carolina thanks to a long-spanning career in broadcasting. Yet, perhaps less well known is the story of how Hinton combined two of his passions — his hometown and radio — into the successful ownership of his own media company.

The year was 1983 and sports radio announcer Henry Hinton had moved from broadcasting East Carolina University football games in Greenville to a similar job in Chapel Hill, where he was the “color” announcer for Carolina football games aired on the Tar Heel Sports Network and WCHL radio. The game was about to start, and Hinton found himself announcing the opening line he had long been calling out at the start of games in Greenville: “Welcome to Dowdy-Ficklen Stadium!” Except, it wasn’t Dowdy-Ficklen. It was UNC’s Kenan Stadium.

“I thought my career was over right there,” Hinton recalled, “but I got to do seven years on the Tar Heel Network. They forgave me. That was a tough one, though. But you make mistakes, and you learn and grow.”

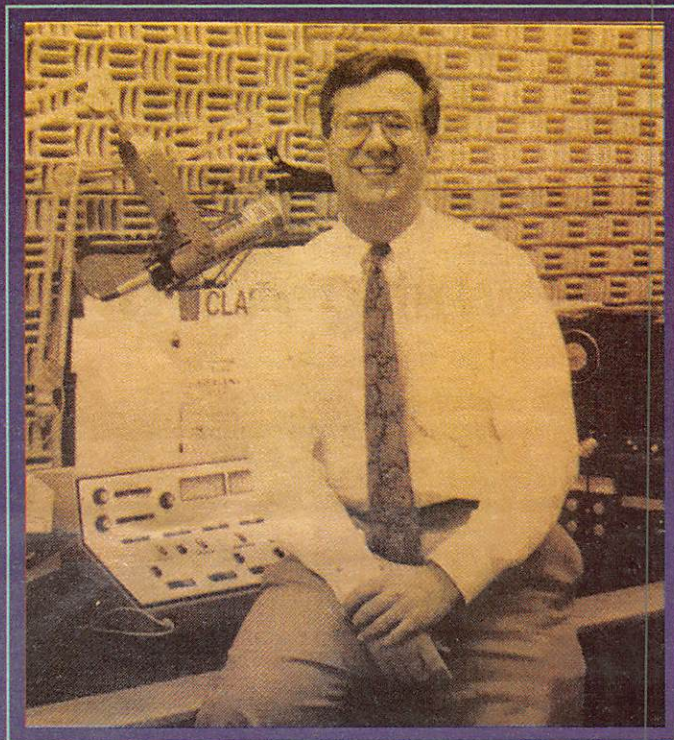
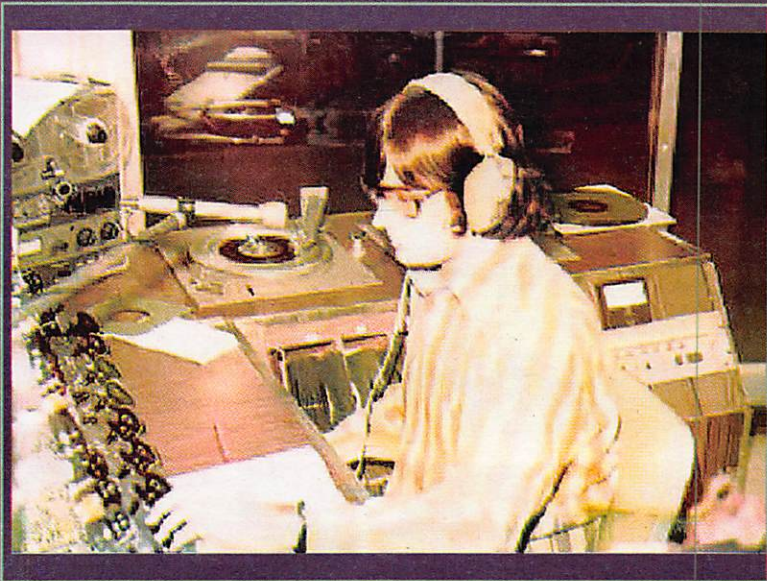
Now 70 Hinton has learned and grown through a long, successful career in radio that has seen him continue to innovate and stay up to date in the digital age. Long before he became president and owner of Inner Banks Media in 2007, radio was a part of Hinton’s life, dating back to high school, when he would hang out with an older friend who had an afternoon show on the air.

“I kind of got bitten by the bug, hanging out with her, pulling her AP wire copy and getting her coffee,” Hinton said. “I was no more than 15 or 16 at the time.”

Henry Hinton prepares for “Talk of the Town,” which is broadcast on two radio stations and also available for viewing on social media and via an app.

photo by
Demetrius Williams

Over the years:



Hinton's experience in radio started in the 1970s and has developed into a long and multi-faceted career.

*Top: Hinton in 1973 on the air at WOOW in downtown Greenville
Bottom: Hinton in studio in 1989 after starting a new company in Greenville
An*

photos contributed by Henry Hinton

Hinton's adventures in radio would take a turn during his sophomore year at ECU. He was on the staff of WECU, the campus station before it became WZMB in 1972. Hinton joined for fun and worked for the campus station for about a year until he was hired by WOOW in 1973.

"It was more a fraternity, a club. Everyone was hanging out, and I had an interest in it. I didn't think I would ever get serious about it but apparently I was good enough to get hired by the local commercial station, which was [the] only Greenville Top 40 station back in those days," Hinton explained.

This was an abrupt change in plans for a college student studying to be a teacher and a coach. Hinton said his parents supported his new career.

"They would've supported me if I told them I wanted to become a dog catcher; they were just great parents. They liked the fact that I was getting into radio. It was a different time; it was the '70s. Getting on to the radio and being on the radio back in those days was a big deal, a lot different than today, to be honest with you," said Hinton.

Hinton's radio work in Greenville led to a job offer from WGH radio in Norfolk, Virginia, in 1975, when he was still a senior at ECU. So Hinton would drive to Norfolk on Fridays and work the Saturday and Sunday shifts, then drive back to Greenville on Sunday nights for classes on Monday.

Changing the station

After graduating in 1976, he was hired full time. Hinton said the 50,000-watt WGH AM station was probably the biggest radio property between Atlanta and Washington and one of the top 50 radio stations in the country. His parents were proud to be able to hear him on the air.

Hinton would secure a job at UNC Chapel Hill for the Tar Heel Sports Network and WCHL in 1983. For the next seven years, he worked as general manager for WCHL and as a color announcer on the Tar Heel Sports Network. Hinton broadcast all UNC football and basketball games, home and away. His first year on the network was the legendary Michael Jordan's last year playing basketball at UNC. Hinton remembers being in the room when Jordan announced he would be playing for the NBA.

Dialing in on a decision

Hinton returned to Greenville in 1989, wanting to start his own radio station in a geographic market that was more affordable for a young broadcaster trying to start a company.

*He does a great job of inviting people in; people from both sides of the political spectrum like to listen to him. Some probably like what he says, some of them don't, and others just want to hear **what** he has to say.*

"I turned down several offers to stay with Vilcom and other broadcast companies . . . in the Triangle because I wanted to own my own stations," Hinton recalled. "I also loved living in Greenville and felt a strong connection to it since I lived here for many years before and attended ECU."

While Hinton was exploring his options, he met with ECU Athletics Director Dave Hart. Hart told Hinton that ECU would be willing to partner with him to broadcast its games on an FM station. At the time, ECU games were broadcast only on AM radio. Hinton said the offer played a big role in his decision to start his company in Greenville.

Media momentum

Today, according to its website, Inner Banks Media owns and operates six FM radio stations, one low power FM translator and one local cable television

station that covers eastern North Carolina from the Virginia border down to Wilmington, North Carolina. One of its radio stations, WNCT-FM, is a top-3 station in the Greenville-New Bern-Jacksonville metro region.

Inner Banks Media's talk stations affiliate with national conservative talk radio shows by Sean Hannity, Mark Levin, Glenn Beck, Clay Travis and Buck Sexton. Other stations focus on music or sports, with several sports talk programs produced locally.

In addition to broadcasting ECU games, ECU sports press conferences are also aired live. Financial, health and church programs round out the programming.

Hinton's own show, "Talk of the Town," is the most popular show on the station, produced every weekday morning from 7 to 9 a.m. The show publicizes information and events that go on in the Greenville area.

Greenville Mayor P.J. Connelly says Hinton has a presence that evokes attention and helps to spread

Hinton is credited with helping spread the message about community events and issues. He's seen here on the air as he partners with the Salvation Army and Greenville Fire and Rescue Christmas toy drive.

photo contributed by Henry Hinton





Henry Hinton Sr. with his son, who is co-owner of Inner Banks Media.

photo courtesy of IBX Media

the message about things that are happening in the community.

"We've seen he has quite the audience that pays attention to his radio show," Connelly said. "He's been instrumental in letting people know when issues come up or if we have events that are taking place; he likes to

Whether it be in a car, by the beach or near the pool, listening habits are changing and if you don't change with it, you're certainly going to be in trouble...



invite guests on his show to discuss said events. It's a benefit for our city."

Connelly says Hinton's positive personality is one of the many factors that has allowed him to have such a long career in Greenville.

"He does a great job of inviting people in; people from both sides of the political spectrum like to listen to him. Some probably like what he says, some of them don't, and others just want to hear what he has to say."

Connelly also mentioned Hinton's Christmas toy drives in partnership with the Salvation Army and Greenville Fire and Rescue.

"We're very thankful for what Hinton's done and what his radio station continues to do," said Connelly.

Waves of change

Despite his success, Hinton has had to battle the digital age stigma that radio is on the decline. He

has continued to innovate his business to combat the notion about radio having no future.

"I don't think radio is dying; I think radio is changing. I think it's going to continue to change," Hinton said.

His company now has its own app for listeners to access broadcasts digitally.

"That would've been unheard of five years ago," said Hinton.

The IBX media app for ECU's first football game of 2023 generated over 3,000 listeners, not including the thousands listening on radio over the air.

Hinton said his stations' listenership continues to grow, as do their advertising sales records.

"Whether it be in a car, by the beach or near the pool, listening habits are changing and if you don't change with it, you're certainly going to be in trouble in 2023. But radio is not dying. We've had a 10-year run of growth year by year that I'm happy with," Hinton said. "Anyone that tells me radio is dying, I can refute that."

The three F's

Hank Hinton, Henry's son and co-owner of Inner Banks Media, said his father played a big role in his decision that radio was also the career for him. "I wasn't sure what I was going to do. I decided I wanted

*You got to be focused,
you got to be fearless,
and you got to have fun.*

to work in radio in Raleigh and not work for him at first. It wasn't until someone left his company and I joined him in 2002," Hank Hinton recalled. "If it wasn't for him, I never would've thought about going into the radio business, and I've been in media sales the last 20 years ever since."

Hank remembers a lesson from when he first started working in his father's company and said the message still carries on with him to this day: "The three f's. You got to be focused, you got to be fearless, and you got to have fun. Focused on the task, fearless in sales; you got to walk into businesses and introduce yourself and you can't be afraid about it. Nobody wants to buy from somebody who's nervous about what they are selling."

And, he added, if you're not having fun you're not going to stay in the business. Hank, 45, is proud of his father's broadcasting career and said he enjoyed listening to him on the air growing up. Yet, unlike his father, Hank has no desire to be on the air, even after his father retires:

"I have tried to stay off the air in our 20-plus years working together. . . I enjoy the media business and would prefer to stay in a management role without being an on-air personality, but I won't say never."

Chris Cooke, a former intern at WNCT and now

producer at WITN television, says Hinton played an influential role in his career.

"Being able to mentor under Mr. Hinton was an experience. You really get to see the ins and outs of what goes into producing and broadcasting a daily show. You learn how to manage the soundboard, be an on-site producer and write sports updates," said Cooke.

Cooke said during his internship he realized how encouraging and influential Hinton is. Cooke said Hinton is a legend in the industry, but that he also takes the time to appreciate and encourage those who show they want to learn radio.

Stay tuned for more

Now 70, Hinton thinks about retirement within the next three to five years, after he fulfills some lingering obligations with Inner Banks Media and pays off some loans. Hinton wants to transition into more of a part-time job, working maybe two to three times a week, with his son taking over the company when he retires.

Even as retirement seems to be knocking at the door, Hinton has marked his name in the history of broadcast radio in the region, from a boy who grew up in Chowan County, to becoming a legend in his own right in radio. ■

"The Greatest to Ever Do It!" Demetrius Williams says you'll see that tagline about him as he makes a name for himself in radio, following his graduation with a degree in Communication in May 2024. "As long I have God, my family and friends by my side, my success has already been guaranteed."

Making waves: Some fast facts about Henry Hinton

- An active supporter of higher education, Hinton is a former member of the UNC Board of Governors and chairman of the ECU Foundation Board.
- He was enshrined into the North Carolina Broadcasters Hall of Fame in 2015.
- Hinton and his son, Hank, own Inner Banks Media, which owns and operates six FM radio stations in eastern North Carolina.
- In 2016, Hinton received the Outstanding Alumni Award from his alma mater East Carolina University.
- He is the former chairman of the Greenville-Pitt County Chamber of Commerce and was named Greenville's Business Leader of the Year in 2002.

source: ncspin.com