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Article updated: 6/19/2012 5:49 AM

Legendary local news anchor to share his stories with a new audience via COD

By **Jamie Sotonoff Dann Gire**

The stories, the jokes and even the tears flow freely when legendary WGN-TV Channel 9 News anchor Jack Taylor talks about his 50-year career in broadcasting.

"News anchors," says the former resident of Kildeer and Mundelein, "come on the air and say 'Good evening,' and proceed to tell you why it's not."

Taylor most likely wished you a good evening if you watched TV in the 1970s, when he anchored the 5 and 10 p.m. news alongside weatherman Harry Volkman, sportscaster Jack Brickhouse and commentator Len O'Connor. Together, from 1970-79, they were the No. 1 TV news show in Chicago.

Throughout his radio and television career, Taylor estimates he's done more than 50,000 interviews, including three presidents (Nixon, Ford and Reagan), many celebrities (Marlon Brando, George Carlin and others) and, while hosting business shows, "nearly everyone on the S&P 500."

Still sharp, funny and in good health at age 83, Taylor, who now lives in Wisconsin, loves to share his stories and is toying with the idea of writing an autobiography.

"What I miss," Taylor said sadly, "is having the audience to share things with."

He is getting a new audience this summer, thanks to College of DuPage radio station host John "Radio" Russell Ghrist.

At 5:50 p.m. each Saturday, a taped two-minute segment called "A Few Minutes with Jack Taylor," will air on Ghrist's Midwest Ballroom show on the college's radio station, WDCB 90.9-FM. In each segment, Taylor shares a story of his experience in the news business -- perhaps his battle with the news director over the station's coverage of Chappaquiddick, or his memory of a young, new weatherman joining the station, "a skinny guy with a big head of hair" named Tom Skilling.

"I like to talk, and if they pay me, I can talk even more," Taylor said, laughing. "My grandson says, 'You'd never be a scuba diver, because you can't talk underwater.'"

And yet, Taylor's television career almost never happened.

While in the Army, Taylor caught the broadcasting bug during a stint on Armed Forces Radio. After the service, he started working in small radio markets like South Dakota and Iowa. Eventually, he moved to Chicago, working at stations including WBBM, WGN and WCFL. In 1958, during tough economic times, Taylor was out of work and struggling to provide for his wife, Virginia, and their three children. Deeply depressed and fearing he had no future in broadcast, he took a job selling Fuller Brushes on commission. When he heard about auditions for a TV news

anchor in Chicago, he jumped at the chance. For the first time in a long stretch, he felt a glimmer of hope for the future. But on the day of his audition, he was sick with the flu. He went anyway.

What happened next still brings tears to his eyes today, more than 50 years later.

WGN-TV Vice President Bob Irving liked Taylor's delivery and decided to take a gamble on this new talent. According to Taylor, the conversation went like this:

Irving: How'd you like to come work for us?

Taylor: I love you!

Irving: You can't talk to me like that, I'm a married man.

"And that was the beginning of 26 beautiful years," Taylor said, tears still on his cheeks. "When someone's willing to give you a chance, it means the world to you."

Taylor would help put Channel 9 News on top. After being replaced in 1979 by John Drury, Taylor continued on in television and radio, doing news talk shows or business programs such as "The Wall Street Journal Report" and "The Stock Market Observer" on Channel 26.

Broadcast news is much different now than when he was in the business, Taylor says. There was less competition, and TV news didn't combine journalism with showmanship. Also, news shows were big money losers for TV stations, and the "if it bleeds, it leads" theory didn't prevail, Taylor said.

"It was a dilemma for broadcasters. Do you give the viewers what they want or what they need? Do you report on a House tax bill or a small plane crash? As Sam Donaldson said, 'What good is it to do a great newscast if no one watches it?'" he said.

Taylor's work earned him the prestigious Silver Circle Award for 25 years of distinguished service on Chicago TV.

"I'm proud of the work I've done. My hope, is that people (who saw my reports) will say, 'You were fair,'" he said. "It's been a wonderful career."

-- Jamie Sotonoff

ÿ Dann Gire and Jamie Sotonoff are looking for suburbanites now in showbiz. Email dgire@dailyherald.com and jsotonoff@dailyherald.com.