

A Conversation with Judy Markey

How did a late-blooming journalist with a hunt-and-peck typing style and a voice not made for radio end up as a syndicated newspaper columnist, author of four books and award-winning radio show co-host?

Interview by
Ellen Blum Barish (MSJ84)

What a year it has been for Judy Markey. Her WGN-radio talk show with Kathy O'Malley was rated by Arbitron as Chicago's No. 1 midday program. In June, she and O'Malley received a Gracie Award for the Best Talk Show in a major market from the American Women in Radio and Television. In March, the duo negotiated a new contract after a well-publicized three-day strike. And 10 months before that, Markey was inducted into the Medill Hall of Fame.

After graduating from Medill, Markey (BSJ65) went to New York looking for magazine work. The closest she got was as a copy editor at Publishers Weekly. It took another 15 years for her to get her first byline.

But once she hit 36, this 5-foot firecracker from Beverly Hills has been on a fast-track trajectory, carving out a career that has relied on a quick wit and unabashedly liberal opinions.

We spoke with Markey in the Tribune Tower office she shares with O'Malley, who was busily working on the next day's show.

Q: You've been successful across print and broadcast media. What skills are you relying on that translate so well?

A. I'm a good question asker. First, because I'm interested, and second, if you can get the confidence of your interviewee, you can usually get the story underneath the story. I'm also pretty observant about the small stuff — I see details before I see the big picture. And that makes writing and conversation more colorful. Additionally, I'm a total cut-to-the-chase person. Which is good when your column is only 650 words, or you have to wrap up a conversation in 20 seconds. And I have a strong voice — I don't mean vocally — but there's a certain sound my writing has. Editors have told me that I am

"My view of our mission statement is to inform, to support and to get good ratings."

Judy Markey, May 2006
"The Kathy & Judy Show"

hard to edit because of that. I would never have been suited to be an objective reporter and, for better or worse, I don't think you get to be a radio host if you are some neutral conversational Switzerland.

Q. You were on the magazine track at Medill in the mid-1960s. How did you land in radio?

A. It was 1989. Kathy was writing the Inc. column for the Chicago Tribune, and I was writing my column for the Chicago Sun-Times. Radio host Roy Leonard had been inviting Kathy on his show frequently, and I was on once or twice a month with WGN's morning drive host, Bob Collins. Lorna Gladstone, the then-WGN program director,



Judy Markey

knew that Kathy and I were good talkers, she knew we were real friends, and mostly she knew it was time to have some female voices who weren't traffic 'chicks' or 'sidekicks' on the radio. So she put us on air for four hours on Super Bowl Sunday when no one was listening except Kathy's mother. It went from there.

Q. What was the format?

A. The format was similar to our show today. We talked about daily life, current events, family relationships. We took calls, asked impertinent questions, and laughed our butts off. Lorna began by giving us an hour a week, then an hour a day, then three hours, once it even went to five hours — and as much as people hated our voices and the fact that we talked over each other (and we still do) we became an acquired taste and then a habit.

Q. So radio lured you from your journalism jobs?

A. Well, ultimately. We'd both been writing columns a long time. Kathy had been doing hers for 12 years, five days a week, and I'd written columns 15 years, three times a week. I kind of felt I had no more observations to make and it was time to make room for other voices. Plus, radio was finally paying us enough money to live on so we didn't have to

Photo by Jennifer Girard

be doing double duty, running from computer to microphone and back again.

Q. How would you describe your show?

A. I would use the word random. Kathy and I go into the studio with separate lists of about 200 possible topics. Some are off the news and some are evergreens that we can always drop in. I would also describe us as liberal. Talk radio not only has few women, but, as we all know, it has even fewer liberals. The other word I'd use is honest. We don't pretend we know about something if we don't; we are there to learn like everyone else.

Q. A caller recently complained about the price of beer and the expectation of a tip at the Cubs' games. Since the team is owned by the Chicago Tribune and the Tribune owns WGN, is this an off-subject subject?

A. No, it's not a problem. We don't get any edicts from upstairs. Yes, we're irreverent, but Kathy has actually been asked to emcee several annual Tribune stockholders' meetings, and she sits right up on that stage with all the suits. The only time in 15 years I can remember being reined in was this spring when we had the "First Annual Kathy and Judy Sex Spelling Bee." It happened to fall on a Thursday, the day when we always have one adult topic, and we warn people to go away if they have children or if they are readily offended. We decided to have a spelling bee with all sexual terms. Our legal department thought it would be best if we submitted our words and sample sentences before we went on air. They cut some of them, but we got a lot of them through.

Q. Like what?

A. Like chlamydia, which is really hard to spell. We wrote such an excellent sample sentence. It was, "Pity-a Lydia — she had chlamydia."

Q. So catch us up on what happened after you left Medill in 1965.

A. When I was in high school, my dream was to go to New York after graduation and work for either Seventeen magazine or The New Yorker. My first job was working for Publishers Weekly, putting semicolons in and checking spelling in six-point type. Then I moved over to an advertising agency that handled nothing but book publishers. And the true story is, I never wrote a magazine piece until I was 36. My first husband and I had lived in Europe for seven years, and the only writing I did was

"One of the promotions WGN did for us in the beginning was "Do not turn your radio dial, these are their real voices."

Judy Markey

the usual correspondence with my friends and family. But when we moved back I sat down and wrote a feature piece that was bought by a Medill graduate at the Tribune named Mary Knoblauch (BSJ64, MSJ66). Mary phoned me and said, 'I like your piece. How's \$250?' I remember saying, 'It's about \$250 more than anyone's ever paid me.' And that was the beginning.

Q. What was the article about?

A. It was about returning to the U.S. and finding that there were just too many choices in the supermarket. In Europe there were maybe six types of cereal instead of 60. It took me two hours to get out of the Jewel. The plethora of choice was just paralyzing. So I wrote about it, and the kids and I got our picture in the paper, and I thought, hey, this is cool. So I began to write for a lot of the women's magazines — Cosmopolitan, Woman's Day, McCall's, Family Circle. I even

got into The New York Times, which was like dying and going to heaven. I really loved working with a lot of editors, but each publication has a different set of sensibilities, and it began to be clear that the best thing for me to do in order to grow would be to find a permanent home. So I sent my clips over to the Chicago Sun-Times.

Q. You went from freelancing to newspaper columning in one quick leap?

A. Pretty much. The features editor, Carroll Stoner, really gave me a huge break. I said I'd like to be a columnist, and at the time I truly didn't realize how bodacious a declaration that was. Fortunately, Carroll had seen my magazine pieces and offered me a Sunday column in a new section they were developing. It was one of those right time/right place/right risk-taking things.

Q. What did you write about?

A. Oh, stuff like getting divorced from your hairdresser, or the first time your kid drives to a rock concert in Wisconsin, or why you can never find the right thing to wear for 60-degree weather. It wasn't usually heavy stuff. But the main downside — in addition to deadlines — was that thing that happens to most columnists: I became relentlessly predatory. Every time someone would bring up something, I'd wonder: is this a column?

Q. Then the fiction career? How did that fit in?

A. I think most journalists always want to take a crack at fiction. So I wrote "The Daddy Clock" on weekends after finishing columns. But it was hard, because I'd always spend the first half of each Saturday trying to get my head back into where I'd left off the previous Sunday. So after "The Daddy Clock" came out in 1998, I decided that I didn't want to be writing fiction and nonfiction at the same time. I wanted to spend full

time on my next novel. That's when I left the paper.

Q: How is radio different from your print experience?

A. Radio is a lot more forgiving when you mess up. A listener can correct me and I can apologize instantly. There's no glaring black-and-white mistake that can haunt you for days or years on end. Also in radio, you do an interview and it's over. You don't have to transcribe it, organize it, have a lead or big socko ending for it. You just have the interview. And lastly, as a writer, I was solo. In radio, I have a fabulous partner. In fact, we describe our show as having three parts: Kathy, Judy and our friendship. So when one of us goes on vacation, it's really two-thirds of the show that's missing.

Q. Whom do you remember most fondly of your professors at Medill?

A. The charismatic Ben Baldwin. The only articles I ever saved were the ones I wrote for Mr. Baldwin. When he died I reread all of them because he just put so much of himself into those red-ink comments.

Q. You are married to Tom Collinger, a professor of marketing and associate dean at Medill and a former advertising executive.

A. Yes, we've been together about eight years and have four children between us – two each from prior marriages. My kids are in their 30's,



Photos by Ellen Blum Barish

Judy Markey and her radio cohost/best girlfriend, Kathy O'Malley, take a breather moments after a show.

and Tom's are in their 20's. The funny thing is that his kids are sort of writing oriented and my kids are sort of business oriented.

Q. Does the topic of the changes at Medill – and the intralearning between journalism and marketing — come up at your dinner table?

A. Oh boy. We have talked for months about this. Our dinner table is a microcosm of the standard tensions between old-school journalists and data-driven marketers. The truth is that we were raised in very different professional churches, so our discussions are very impassioned. But they are fun too. We're learning about each other's worlds all the time. No, we do not always agree, but then he's a PC guy and I'm a Mac girl, so we are used to having different sensibili-

A Markey Reader

Fiction

- "The Daddy Clock" (Bantam, 1998)
- "Just Trust Me" (Mira, 2004)

Collections of her syndicated Chicago Sun-Times columns

- "How To Survive Your High School Reunion and Other Mid-Life Crises" (Contemporary, 1984) out of print
- "You Only Get Married For the First Time Once" (Doubleday, 1988) out of print

ties — or is that 'platforms?'

Q. Ever get a Medill F?

A. What's that?

Q. I guess not.

A. Actually, I never got a bad grade on my news stories, but this was because I was a horrible typist. I could only do the hunt-and-peck thing. So because I typed so slowly, my stories were really tight.

Q. Are you still a hunter and pecker?

A. Only when I'm not wearing my contacts. M



Markey and O'Malley engage in quick-witted banter that has had audiences from four states tuning in for 19 years.