

A History of 2CCR – Cumberland Community Radio

By Mark Drumgold



The first attempt to start a community radio station in our area occurred in the early 1970s but unfortunately it had come and gone by the time the first "experimental" broadcasts were allowed in the early 1980s. These "experimental" broadcasts were supposed to be mainly technical tests but you were allowed to stay on air for three months and it wasn't long before the technical tests had a lot of on air programming.

I think that group was the first in Sydney having formed about twelve months before the Narwee Baptist Church and Green Valley Radio groups both still broadcasting today.

After NBC went on air in early 1983 a local Parramatta school teacher Bing Kinsey decided to try again to establish a group in our area. The first formal meeting was held in October 1983 at the Parramatta Adult Mirant Education building in George Street Parramatta next to the Commonwealth Bank after being announced in the Parramatta Advertiser. Cumberland Community Radio was born vowing to serve Baulkham Hills, Holroyd and Parramatta. About twenty people attended that meeting.

Bing Kinsey chaired the meeting. Involved early were Peter Herlinger who would later serve on Holroyd Council for Labor. Mike Smith the first Honorary Secretary an AWU union organiser. Trevor Easlea (unfortunately passed away from cancer a few years ago) and Peter Worthington an AWA engineer the first technical bods who both stayed involved nearly right up to the license hearing and who built from scratch the groups broadcasting rigs. Many of the others at that first meeting stayed involved serving on the committee at various stages.

At that time it was thought it wouldn't be long before the station would be on air. Little did those people know it would be ten years the then Department of Communications would cite "bandwidth restrictions" over and over again to delay the licensing of the second wave of community stations in Sydney.

A second group Parramatta Regional Radio came into existence about six months after CCR run by a couple of older guys whose names escape me. They operated more like a group wanting to establish a commercial station out of the second floor above a shopping mall in Parramatta and this eventually caused trouble with their younger members who wanted a more community oriented and democratic group.

This young group formed Radio West formed shortly after.

About five years after the first CCR meeting a group formed called Hills Community Radio wanting a station for the Baulkham Hills Shire formed with Ian Woodward as it's Chairperson. Ian was a Liberal associated with the State Member in Baulkham Hills, Fred Caterson. Hills Community Radio believed Baulkham Hills Shire needed a standalone station.

A few test broadcasts were held by CCR from different locations including from St Vincents Boys Home Westmead (associated with the Marist Brothers) before the move to the Balcombe Heights Estate. That move was a real battle as Fred Caterson and some Liberals on the Shire Council attempted to prevent CCR from moving there believing it lessened the chances of the Hills getting its own standalone station. But in fairness to Fred when push came to shove later on he came through with strong support and lobbying to get the station established.

The Marist connection paid off though as one of the early members of the group went to school with Bernie Mullane's son. Bernie had served as Shire Mayor and had been a long time Councillor in Baulkham Hills and he dug his heels in to make sure the Balcombe Heights move happened. To Council's credit once the decision was made they moved on only charging us a peppercorn rent which they never bothered to collect.

Balcombe Heights was the perfect location as it looked over Holroyd and Parramatta with good reception there and a line of sight to Maroota ensuring most of the Hills received good signal as well.

Trevor Easlea, Peter Worthington and a group of volunteers set about building. The early tests involved days without sleep for many, scrounging bits and pieces from all over the place including egg cartons to build the first "real" studio at Balcombe Heights. The tests were pretty amazing with many community groups participating and a real sense of community built. During those tests over 200 local groups went to air.

Radio West, Parramatta Regional Radio and Hills Community Radio conducted their own tests as well and the Department sought to limit the number of tests held by all groups in the area. The frequency used was 90.9 for tests by all groups.

Radio West conducted one of their test broadcasts at CCRs Balcombe Heights studio. After this the two groups decided they had like objectives and merged to form Cumberland Community Radio West ... CCRW.

CCRW was responsible for breaking the roadblocks the Department had put in the way of expansion of community radio in Sydney. We knew the key was to knock over the Department's technical arguments about limited frequencies available and to show that broadcasting systems could be designed to largely contain reception to limited areas allowing stations in different parts of Sydney to use the same frequency.

Trevor designed a "batwing" antenna array and tweaked it to align our signal as closely as we could to the broadcast area we proposed to reduce overlap with adjoining Council areas. We then hit the Department with a bombshell asking for permission to test "synchronous" FM broadcasting for the first time in Australia when they said we couldn't cover the whole Shire. Synchronous broadcasting is a strange beast ... what you do is this. You broadcast your main signal ... in this case from Balcombe Heights. You set up a reception antenna on a high point ... in our case Maroota Ridge. You then set up a second transmitter ... on the far side of Maroota ridge and use the physical separation to rebroadcast a signal on the other side of Maroota ridge on the same frequency as the main transmitter with little interference. The Department said it couldn't be done ... we lobbied federally and said what's the harm in trying ...

Our technical test was one of the most comprehensive field tests (signal strength) surveys ever undertaken in Australia measuring signal strength and reception at over a thousand points all over our broadcast area right down to Wisemans Ferry. We then authored a comprehensive broadcast engineering report and threw it at the Department. The Department had used "broadcast models based theory" which were in its "Draft Guidelines" to back its case but we had real world results showing that their theoretical arguments were rubbish. The most annoying thing was these draft guidelines had been in use for a couple of decades without ever being finalised and the Department when pushed would always fall back on the argument that they were in draft format and they couldn't be held to applying them.

The Department caved in and finally admitted that with some bandwidth clearance that had been planned for years there would be enough frequencies for everyone without sharing frequencies. The only alternative to our now proven plan of sharing frequencies.

But bureaucracies are nothing if not vindictive. The Department announced that it proposed to split our area in two ... Parramatta Holroyd ... Baulkham Hills ... two stations.

We were having none of it. The argument had always been by some that Parramatta Holroyd and Baulkham Hills were fundamentally different and that meant two stations. Our argument was that you needed was a big enough catchment area to sustain a station in an urban setting. Parramatta would grow to be a major business commercial centre in its own right (as it is clearly now) with domiciliary surrounding areas with regional hubs ... Merrylands, Castle Hill (as it is clearly now) with a mix of residential types. The proposed broadcast area would be diverse (a good thing) but a functioning whole around a large city centre.

Off to Canberra we went to talk to the Department's Assistant Secretary for Planning ... very unproductive .. take it or leave it ... we've made the decision. We'll leave it thanks and expect to hear more.

We contacted Russ Gorman the Federal Member for Greenway whose electorate took in a small part of our proposed broadcast area. He was someone that members of CCR knew, explained our position, the Department's attitude which we thought stank and was short sighted. He said can't promise anything but I'll look into it. He came back about two weeks later and said I've spoken to the Department ... what is wrong with those people don't they understand what the plans for this area of Sydney are and how can they talk to people like that. He said I didn't like their attitude even when they were explaining their decision to me and I'm going to do something about it.

Russ was very good mates with Michael Duffy the then Minister for Communications and spoke to him about it ... he spoke to his Department's officials ... same result. The Minister didn't like what he heard either and put proverbial bomb under them. Decision reversed ... one station. The Minister conveyed through Russ his desire that there be only one group when the time came for a license hearing.

As it happened I had been trying to convince the other Committee members of CCR to make overtures to Hills Community Radio for some time ... they weren't keen but agreed we needed to bite the bullet now. Hills Community Radio realised there would be only one station and they realised a need to get it done.

We merged. Ian Woodward of Hills became Chairperson (my very unpopular suggestion) with the ex CCRW Chairperson deputy.

I can't remember if Brian Lankow and Ivor Jones were members of Hills (I think they were) but if they weren't they were part of the merged entity about that time. I do remember the Ridge brothers came over as did Maureen Hull. Brian did some religious programming which was easier I think than he thought because that type of programming had always been part of CCRs scheduling with the local Seventh Day Adventist (Margaret Taylor) and Baptist Churches (Rupert ?) providing programming right through CCRs tests.

Within a year or so I had left ... twenty years of public broadcasting was enough ... Sydney University Radio, 2SER, Radio for the Print Handicapped and years on CCRs Committee including the longest stint as Honorary Secretary. Compiling and writing big sections of our Engineering Plan then our License Proposal Plan. But some of the others carried on right up to the license hearing.

I can't remember the exact hearing date a little over twelve months before we went on air. It was held by the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal with Sue Brooks the presiding member at the Memorial Avenue Community Centre, Merrylands. Ian Woodward, Chairperson, Jim Hanna, Honorary Secretary and Margaret Clarke, Assistant Secretary appearing for CCRW. It was a pretty friendly affair but some tough questions from Sue on our technical skills with Trevor and Peter no longer actively involved.

Now a roll call ... Bing Kinsey, Peter Herlinger, Mike Smith, Margaret Cartisano, Trevor Easlea, Peter Worthington, Peter Dixon, Jennie Cheeseman, Di Jones, Paul Alwan, Mark Riley, Jeff Ruitenbach, the Ridge boys, Greg Parkes, Jim Hanna, Margaret and Cliff Taylor, Rupert, Margaret Clarke, Mark Currie, Ian Woodward, Brian Lankow, Ivor Jones, Mick Rafferty, Maureen Hull, Glenn Coddington, Darren Bruce, Peter Rasmussen, Les Bishop, Wayne Churchmichael, Andrew Warren (he of roof skiing fame putting an antenna up in the rain now a family law expert), Shane Swartz, Adela Rodio and many others got us there after ten long years. If someone sees this and says you forgot me I apologise in advance.

Also our great supporters the Commonwealth Bank who tipped in a little money every now and again. The Parramatta Advertiser and Hills Community News for running the odd stories to let the community know we were there.

Some of the early members have made a living in the media. Margaret Clarke (nee Rafferty) is now Editorial Manager at Choice Australia. After spending the bulk of her career in commercial media she joined CHOICE as a content editor in 2018. Margaret leads the editorial and investigations team which, as well as producing CHOICE magazine each month, also creates in-depth investigative content.

Peter Rasmussen was a long term commercial broadcaster in regional NSW. Peter is now a producer and presenter in Port Macquarie for the ABC, covering sport and weekend breakfast.

It's a potted history and I apologise if the timeline isn't exactly perfect but there it is for the record. Maybe from time to time I'll update and add corrections after talking to some of the other early members.

To end you know you make great friends in an endeavour like this and to this day there's upto a half a dozen of us old timers depending who's in town at Sydney Swans games (when you're allowed to go

lately) ... met in 1983 to start a community radio station still friends 38 years later ... not bad, not bad at all.