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Radio host's 'pet' project hits big time

By Bryan McKenzie / Daily Progress staff writer
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When Hal Abrams left Charlottesville back in April 2000, he had no idea he'd wind up living in a motor home down by the Utah desert and producing the nation's top radio pet program.

"I'm living in a house now, although we've still got the motor home with the studio in it," Mr. Abrams laughed, as he talked from his Utah studio near the Arizona border. "And we're the largest, biggest, best, No. 1 animal radio show in America. It feels good. Real good."

The network feeds programming to hundreds of radio stations across the country, programming that includes celebrities talking about their pets and pet experts talking about your pets.

It was for the best

Mr. Abrams conceived the network after his dismissal from a Charlottesville radio station. His show, Hal and Naomi, featured phone calls to celebrities, off-hue humor and other comic bits. At one point Hal and Naomi spent a weekend in a doghouse to support the local animal shelters. That stunt led Mr. Abrams to take great interest in the plight of abandoned and unwanted animals.

But the station bosses disapproved of his style and let him go. Shortly afterward the station was sold to a national chain that provides listeners with a steady diet of sexual humor from syndicated sycophants, condom advertisements and songs that describe interesting physical acts in great detail.

"It wasn't too much later that there was a lot worse on the airwaves,"

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Mr. Abrams said. "We were before our time, I guess."

When he left, Mr. Abrams started the animal show with financial backing from the Fluvanna County shelter Caring for Creatures. The show bore that name for several years, prior to the shelter withdrawing its support.

"They supported us for a long time and it's pretty expensive, especially for a shelter," Mr. Abrams said. "Unfortunately [for Caring for Creatures], about a week after they withdrew Bissell signed on as a sponsor and we became a profitable organization."

Jumping on the ship

Other sponsors followed, including Clorox and Petco. At one point Mr. Abrams drove the country in the motor home, producing shows from various Petco locations around the United States. Then a large shelter in Utah, Best Friends, contacted him and signed on as a sponsor. Now the network distributes five different shows for syndication.

"It's a blast. We do personality interviews. We have people like Dean Koontz and I'm scheduled to do Lou Asner. Um, that didn't sound right," he said. "There's also a show with a lady out of San Francisco who does investigative reporting. It's kind of like an animal '60 Minutes.'"

Unfortunately, we can't hear the shows in Mr. Abrams' old Charlottesville stomping grounds. The closest station is WTZE, 1470-AM in Tazewell.

"Maybe someday we'll be there," Mr. Abrams said. "I think they'll probably understand my sense of humor now."

Listen to Hal at www.animalradio.com. Listen to me at (434) 978-7271 or bmckenzie@dailyprogress.com.