Everybody knows his name; many remember his voice… The sign dedicating the California 4- Crosstown Freeway to him is hard to overlook. In June, he will celebrate his 85th birthday, along with Sylvia, his wife of 61 years, four children, eight grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren. “In my personal life, I have been extremely fortunate to have a loving family—huge support by my wife—and to have had the enjoyment of many friends over the years,” confesses Ort J. Lofthus, a Humphreys College trustee for forty-six years.

How did you become affiliated with Humphreys College?

“So often, friendships and affiliations lead to becoming a part of another group. I knew Dr. John Humphreys as a member of our Downtown Stockton Lions Club, and he invited me to become a trustee. Just that simple. I have enjoyed it immensely, watching it grow and become an even greater part of the community. Any contribution I have made involves getting the College better known and its role better understood.”

As far as I know, it has not been just Humphreys. You were actively involved with KUOP Radio, the Events Center at University of the Pacific, Delta College Bond Campaign, and Lodi School Board of Trustees.

“My education motivation came from having had the benefit of a good education myself and having four children in local schools; it seemed like a ‘command performance’.”

Many Stocktonians remember you as a radio broadcaster and television entrepreneur: a stockholder and general manager of the AM station KJOY in Stockton. Later, you created an FM station, KJAX, and in 1970 won the Stockton franchise for cable television—Big Valley Cablevision. You were also president of the state-wide radio and television trade association, California Broadcasters Association in 1986.

“I never dreamed I would become a radio broadcaster; it never entered my mind. As a youngster, I wanted to become a doctor. Then, the Second World War intervened. I became a tail gunner/radioman on a torpedo bomber operating off an aircraft carrier in Atlantic and Pacific theatres and the China Sea (I saw no combat but plenty of action). At the end of the war, I had determined that journalism was for me, and upon graduating from the University of Washington (‘49) in Business/Journalism, I took a job with a weekly newspaper. About two years later, I looked around for more exciting opportunities and soon found myself in radio advertising in Palm Springs, California. From there, I moved to KJOY in Stockton. In 1968, I put KJAX
on the air in 1968, and two years later, I was one of three founders of the cablevision franchise in Stockton, first named Big Valley Cablevision. I retired in Stockton in 1986. I have never looked back. I have never had a single regret.”

**During your radio-broadcasting career, you witnessed the challenging times of the growing television competition.**

“In 1952, when we took over the station (called KXOB at that time), it was an affiliate of Mutual Broadcasting. The programming was an “Irish Stew.” Within a year or so we dropped out of Mutual, went a hundred percent independent, offering music, news, and community affairs programming. Music was Rock ‘N Roll. Ratings shot up, heavy in the 18-34 age group, but huge in 17 and under. The station took first place, and never relinquished it. Sixteen years later, I launched KJAX FM: beautiful music, almost zero talk with exception of news. It took the top ratings in the 35 plus age group, and never lost them.”

**Who were your role models in broadcasting?**


**Many remember that during your thirty-three years in Stockton radio, your stations were frequently involved in the community.**

“I was virtually the only broadcaster in our listening area—and in our one-newspaper town—who editorialized. News and community issues were of a high priority. Citizens seemed anxious to hear various opinions. I gave it to them, via my own voice on my own stations.”

**I am sure that one of those hot issues was the never-ending construction of the Crosstown Freeway, which now bears your name.**

“...The State of California demolished eleven downtown blocks with a ‘Freeway to Nowhere,’ knocked down everything in its way, and ‘left town,’ abandoning it to weeds and litter. As regards the highways in, around, and through Stockton and the county, Northern California and Stockton, in particular, always got the short end of help from Sacramento. Once again, I took to our airwaves and personally challenged every city council member, county supervisor, state representative, by name, and the governor almost every day for several years. It was completed in 1993. Another example: I-5, 1,400 miles from Canada to Mexico was complete except for twenty-four miles, which were in our county. Thousands of cars and trucks daily overwhelmed our city streets in attempt to reach highways south, north, and east of Stockton. For a good two years, I called all the politicos to task for their total inaction. It opened in October 1979. Actually, I fought eighteen years on the air and off, along with many citizens, to force its happening. I still go on the airwaves of my former stations (sold in late eighties) and on other stations in the area to promote transportation issues, such as the I-280 Widening battle, successfully concluded last year.”

**Many may remember your concern about Stockton’s downtown redevelopment.**

“In short, it was about nine city blocks in downtown. Many well-to-do business people owned property in skid row and were reluctant to change. Skid row was not empty buildings, most were occupied. The issue took on
legs and seemed to stir strong feelings in many areas. It took years, but it happened… Another big issue: In the 1980s, Stockton had a mayor who wanted to change our charter from a city-manager model to a strong-mayor type. When he failed, he began to harass city department heads and influence their hiring practices. They resisted, and, in our opinion, he resorted to skullduggery, and we took him on—only media voice to do so. It all came to a screeching halt when the citizenry overwhelmingly recalled him.”

**In 1959, you were named “Young Man of the Year” by the Junior Chamber of Commerce, and ten years later, “Mr. Stockton” by the Stockton Board of Realtors.**

“The city government soon noticed that our broadcasting genuinely cared about the citizens and their future. For example, we took the lead in radio when it came to playing a significant role in creating a Boys and Girls Club facility in East Stockton. We were told it would never work in that area, that the community would not support it. It was soon built (that was some thirty years ago), and today the facility serves over 1,200 youngsters daily. When we took on such issues, we literally adopted them, until the issues came to a successful conclusion.”

**How did you, as radio owner and broadcaster, cope with the emergence of the mass television viewership in the 1950s and 1960s?**

“Radio never really got hurt at the outset. The big radio personalities shifted to television, leaving radio to very young people with new ideas, not afraid to try something radically different. KJOY was typical. KUOP (National Public Radio) never tried for mass audience, never scored over 2-3 percent of the listener share.”

**As a young man, you graduated in Business and Journalism; your first two jobs were in newspapers, then over thirty years in broadcasting and cable television… What do you think about the current crisis of the newspaper industry?**

“To a large degree, newspapers brought the current decline on themselves. The periodical press lived in the Stone Age as communications exploded. It let others invade its prime reason for existence—news. Most newspapers seemed frozen in their approach to technology. Perhaps the latter was due to capture the listener/reader. However, it seemed the press industry never really tried. Will newspapers survive? For many, the prospects do not look good.”

**While talking about the media future, how do you see the prospects of radio broadcasting?**

“Radio as a programming service for the general public has been with us for 90 years, since 1920. In the course of the first decades, it managed to define its role in the competition with the press. However, under deregulation in the eighties, the broadcasting industry hurt itself terribly, and continues to do so. Thank goodness, there are exceptions, stations truly involved in their communities. But generally, radio has become a true Wurlitzer—a jukebox: sameness in music, in most cases, no news, no community service, and no imagination. Huge corporations own hundreds of stations. Originality is not in their dictionary. Radio was the model of change in the fifties, and then it lost its way pursuing the bottom line with a corporate mentality.”

**What are your hobbies?**

“My hobbies range from photography to soaring (gliders); the latter resulted in my 1978 altitude record recognized by the International Society of Soaring in Paris, France, and the Soaring Society of America. As I already mentioned, during the Second World War, I was a tail gunner/radioman on a U.S. Navy torpedo bomber and flew off an aircraft carrier in the Atlantic, the Pacific, and the China Sea—no combat, but two of the planes I flew in were totaled due to my pilot’s errors. From then on, if I was to fly, I wanted to be at the controls. My son, Jay, and I built model airplanes together when he was very young. When he turned twelve, I introduced
him to gliders in the Bay Area, and he received his pilot’s license on his thirteenth birthday. I had watched his training and decided, “At last, here’s how I can fly a plane, too.” After several years of local soaring, I tried ‘wave soaring’ over the desert at Minden, Arizona. After experiencing extremely violent and dangerous air for twenty minutes (on tow), I released the line and flew out of the wave’s rotor. On my way back to the airport, I caught moderate lift, and in turn, it led me back to the mountains and to a very strong wave-lift action. In an additional twenty minutes or so, I was at 25,600 feet, which is an altitude record (it is comprised of glider pilots around the world who exceed 18,000 feet over ground) as recognized by the Soaring Society of America. Needless to say that it happened to be my first experience at trying for an altitude record, and frankly, I really did not know what I was doing… a lucky guy.”

If you were asked about your life credo, what would you say?

No. 1: You get out of life only what you put into it. No. 2: No one is any better than I am, and I am no better than any other person.

~Interview: Stanislav Perkner

Editorial Note:
Ort J. Lofthus has dedicated almost five decades of his life to the service of Humphreys College. He has been personally active in a number of ways, only some of them mentioned in our interview. He is a co-founder of Hospice of San Joaquin County. He served as president of the Boys and Girls Club (1966-70), Downtown Lions Club, Stockton Chamber of Commerce, the Yosemite Club, and Stockton Credit Bureau. He was the first president of New Directions (Substance Abuse Treatment) at the county jail and the president of the Cancer Society of the county. He co-chaired a $4M fundraiser for KUOP Events Center, worked as co-chair of the Stockton Division of the United Way, and participated in the $20M bond campaign for Delta College. Many have met Ort Lofthus as a trustee of not only Humphreys College (46 years), but also Lodi School Board, and St. Joseph’s Hospital. He was named as Stockton’s Young Man of the Year in 1959 and Mr. Stockton in 1960. He was also active in broadcasting statewide, becoming the president of the California Broadcasting Association (the trade association for television and radio) in 1986. In 2006, the San Joaquin County Council of Governments honored him with the Leadership Award.

HUMPHREYS COLLEGE LIBRARY AND LEARNING CENTER...
FROM THE NEW BOOKS:
UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMS AND
THE GRADUATE PROGRAM IN EDUCATION


Blum, George P. *Coming of Age in Wartorn Lithuania and Germany*. Trafford, 2008.


DeFilippis, James, and Susan Saegert, eds. The Community Development Reader. Routledge, 2008.


Hollin, Thomas A. Uncivil Wars: Political Campaigns in a Media Age. 2nd ed. Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2009.


Robertson, Pat. Courting Disaster: How the Supreme Court is Usurping the Power of Congress and the People. Integrity Publisher, 2004.


March 2010