2023 annual report

npr Network

WGLT.org 89.1 FM
Bloomington-Normal’s Public Media
Preparation was the prevailing theme for WGLT in 2023.

In this space a year ago, I said WGLT would be moving to a new location in summer 2023, but supply lines and a backlog of campus projects conspired to delay that move. (I’m thrilled to report that as I write this in January 2024, WGLT is in its brand-new, modernized digs at the corner of Locust and University, but we’ll save the bulk of that story for this space next year). So much of 2023 was spent packing, unpacking, planning, purchasing, and … pausing? … our relocation. But the show must go on, and I’m proud our team didn’t let all that work take away from WGLT’s commitment to service:

• WGLT picked up a slew of honors from our peers, including: a state-leading SEVEN Crystal Microphone Awards from the Illinois News Broadcasters Association (Charlie Schlenker for Best Newscast and Best Use of Sound, Ryan Denham for Best Investigative Report and Best Writing, Lyndsey Jones for Best Reporter, and station awards for Best Digital Presence and Best Station), a national first place photojournalism honor from the Public Media Journalists Association for Graduate Student Emily Bollinger, and a Region 7 (Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Wisconsin) Edward R. Murrow Award from RTDNA for Digital Coverage. WGLT was named Business Partner of the Year by our friends at the McLean County Arts Center. We are bursting with awards—we packed more than 200 as we prepared to move!

• In June, we hosted the inaugural Highway 309 Live music event, presented by CEFCU, at the Normal Theater. That was followed in October by our second show, a tribute to our late legendary blues host Delta Frank Black. This ongoing series supplants our popular summer concert series, which had run its course after a highly successful 20-year run.

• WGLT welcomed its first-ever Report for America journalist. Melissa Ellin joined the newsroom in July as our Community Mental Health reporter, and her impact was immediate. Report for America places reporters throughout the country and funds 50% of those positions for up to two years. Special thanks to Chestnut Health Systems for helping meet this amazing opportunity for WGLT via a funding match, as well as MANY individual donors.

• August saw the purchase and installation of a brand-new broadcast transmitter, replacing our failing 2008 model and allowing WGLT to return to full power. Illinois State University helped fund two-thirds of the cost.

• Our partnership with The Vidette—the Student Voice of Illinois State University—continues to expand. WGLT assisted The Vidette with its launch of two newsletters (one each dedicated to Redbird sports and to student-focused news), and we unveiled the Democracy Project podcast in early 2024.

• In April, WGLT followed NPR’s lead in leaving Twitter (or “X” or whatever it’s called by the time you read this) after the platform capriciously and incorrectly labeled NPR as “State Sponsored Media.” Our departure has had little discernable impact on traffic to our website, but as a reminder, you can find us on Facebook, Instagram, at WGLT.org, on the NPR app, at 89.1 FM, or sign up for our newsletters.

• I wrapped up my first full year as a member of NPR’s Board of Directors, and for the second half of the year I had the honor of serving on the search committee to select the replacement for retiring CEO John Lansing.
• Speaking of NPR, WGLT was prominently featured as a success story in the organization’s position paper “Public Media and the Future of Local Journalism.”

• In October, Bradley and Illinois State University extended their Public Service Operating Agreement for WGLT to oversee operation of WCBU in Peoria through June 30, 2029.

• In November, our annual Radio Faces fundraiser returned with much fanfare at our first in-person, post-COVID fête. White House Correspondent Franco Ordoñez took guests behind the scenes of a typical day in the press corps, provided a glimpse into Air Force One, and told us the reason for the dramatic pause in his signature sign-off.

• Also during Radio Faces, we welcomed five new honorees to the WGLT Hall of Fame: Carol Carey Odekirk, John “Larry” Eymann, Joseph Haynes Davis, CEFCU, and Laura Kennedy.

• And finally, thanks to you, WGLT successful hit its goals during the spring and fall fund drives.

I almost can’t wait to write this recap next year. We’ll be able to talk about our new facility—more than three years in the making—and I’m confident those new digs will translate into increased service. The building serves as the home of both WGLT and The Vidette. Illinois State funded the building upgrades, and the broadcast equipment is the result of a quiet capital campaign begun by WGLT in 2019. We’re excited to be co-located with ISU’s student journalists.

Speaking of students, WGLT interns continue to be major contributors at our operation, from development to production, content, and more. We celebrated two scholarship winners, Jack Podlesnik and Jayla Johnson, thanks to support from the Dr. Robert and Marilyn Sutherland endowment and the WGLT Future Fund endowment.

WGLT has embraced a growth mindset. Since 2016, the organization has grown from 15 full- and part-time employees to 43, we’ve upgraded our facility and replaced most of our broadcast equipment, and we have increased our digital audience by more than 20 times! We’ve done all that and still managed to break even on the financial scorecard. That’s thanks to support from Illinois State, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and the Illinois Arts Council. But, as most of you know, more than half of WGLT’s support comes directly from generous businesses and individuals in Central Illinois—THANK YOU!

Local journalism is in crisis throughout the country, and Bloomington-Normal is far from immune. This community should be proud of its support of WGLT, but there’s more work to do. It is our intention to continue to expand in a fiscally responsible way, in a manner that matches the community’s capacity for financial support, and in a way that meets our audience’s expectations for professionalism and quality. Everything we’ve done is a direct result of your support for this public service. Thank you isn’t really sufficient, but it is very sincere.

R.C. McBride
General Manager
From the WGLT newsroom

Most-read stories of 2023

• Facing question about acquisition, Rivian’s RJ Scaringe rattles off the benefits of being independent
• Live Blog: Bloomington-Normal and Unit 5 election results
• Thousands of B-N borrowers in limbo after Supreme Court’s ruling on student debt forgiveness
• Illinois State athletics director resigns after questions about spending for Big Ten trip on Aaron Rossi’s plane
• Jake from State Farm is spoofed in Saturday Night Live fake commercial
• Eastview Christian Church’s senior pastor resigns amid allegations of an ‘abusive power dynamic and coverup’
• State Farm plans to outsource some IT services to Indian company HCLTech
• Experts on policing put Normal arrest video in context

Noteworthy features

• WGLT’s investigative reporting, led by Digital Content Director Ryan Denham, uncovered questionable spending in Illinois State University Athletics along with large financial pledges to the Athletics Department that raised suspicions. WGLT’s plans to report on these matters coincided with the athletic director’s abrupt resignation.
• WGLT reported extensively on Bloomington-Normal’s housing shortage and published a seven-part series on the changing workforce in McLean County.

Awards haul

• WGLT won multiple awards in 2023 for its broadcast and digital coverage.
• Digital (regional winner/Edward R. Murrow Award, RTNDA)
• Best station (Crystal Mic Awards, Illinois News Broadcasters Association)
• Best reporter (1st place, Lyndsay Jones/Crystal Mic Awards)
• Best digital presence (1st place, Ryan Denham/Crystal Mic Awards)
• Best newscast (1st place, Charlie Schlenker/Crystal Mic Awards)
• Investigative Report (1st place, Ryan Denham/Crystal Mic Awards)
• Best Use of Sound (1st place, Charlie Schlenker/Crystal Mic Awards)
• Photography (1st place, Emily Bollinger/Public Media Journalists Association)
• Digital writing (2nd place, Ryan Denham/PMJA)
• Newscast (2nd place, Charlie Schlenker/PMJA)

Digital highlights

• Average monthly traffic on WGLT.org rose 22% in 2023
• Launched Friday arts newsletter called Weekend Scoop
• Introduced WGLT Newscasts podcast
2023 WGLT donor roll

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