

100 YEARS  
**WKAR**  
A CENTURY OF SERVICE



## WKAR: A Century of Service

# INSIDE

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project owes a debt of gratitude to WKAR staff alumni Diane Hutchens and Jeanie Croope. They researched and wrote past anniversary publications for WKAR Radio and TV that shaped A Century of Service.

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Thanks also to the many WKAR alumni who lent their memories and resources to the Century of Service project, especially Tim Zeko.

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#### The 1920s 6

Making the connection

#### The 1930s 8

Expanding educational programming

#### The 1940s 10

War news fills the radio schedule

#### The 1950s 12

A revolution in broadcasting

#### The 1960s 14

Technology boosts access

#### The 1970s 18

Public broadcasting grows more inclusive

#### The 1980s 20

Everyone has a role

#### The 1990s 22

The dawn of digital delivery

#### The 2000s 24

Evolving platforms

#### The 2010s 26

Exploring new technologies

#### The 2020s 28

Pandemic shifts

#### The Next Century 30

What's next for WKAR?

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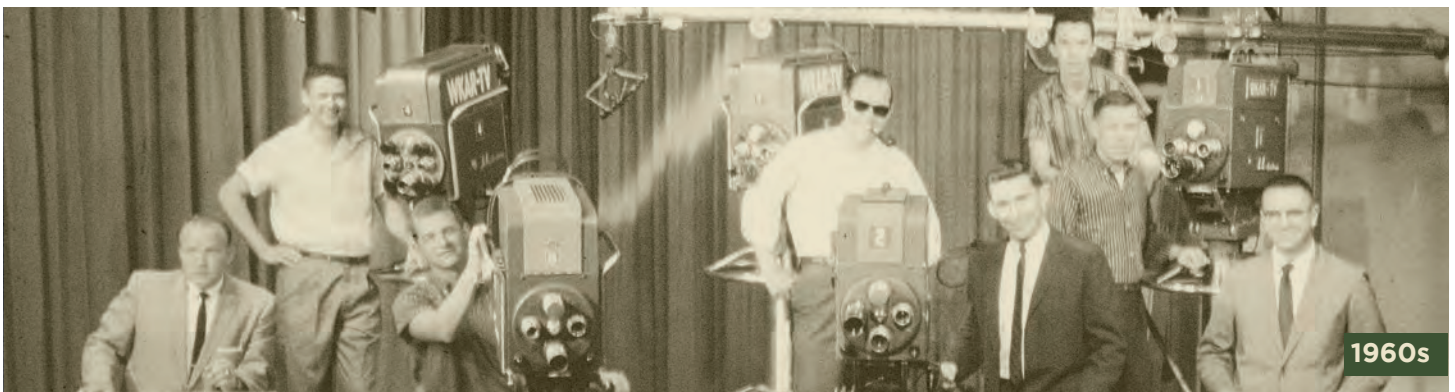
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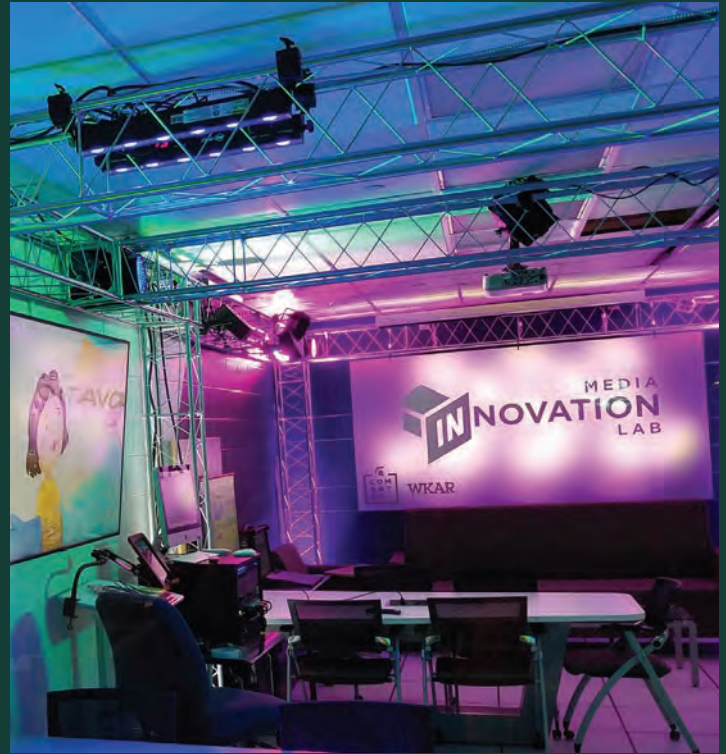




# A Century of Service

On Aug. 18, 2022, WKAR Public Media marks its 100th anniversary. WKAR began as an AM radio station, broadcasting agricultural news and information, and has grown into a robust media organization that includes WKAR TV, WKAR Radio, [wkar.org](http://wkar.org), Radio Reading Service, WKAR Digital Studios and WKAR Family.





When WKAR Radio first went on the air in 1922, it was a vital resource for mid-Michigan listeners, providing a window to the community — and the world — via the information, education and inspiration broadcast over the airwaves.

Carrying smartphones in our pockets with the capacity to do the work of supercomputers that once filled entire rooms, it's hard to remember a time when a radio tuned to a local station was the best — and fastest — way to access information.

A college campus is an ideal setting for a fledgling media outlet, offering ample opportunity for research, growth and development. It's an environment that encourages experimentation and rewards innovation.

Michigan Agricultural College and WKAR were well-matched from the beginning, supporting the surrounding community by

educating and informing the residents using technology that was quickly evolving — often thanks to the innovation happening on campus.

Since the beginning, WKAR has had a social responsibility and dedication to community embedded in its mission.

WKAR's growth and development throughout its first century have been driven by a central question: What does the community need?

In its first 100 years, WKAR has much to be proud of. This magazine highlights the milestones, the creativity and the resourcefulness it took to keep the community informed, educated and inspired with each new decade.

WKAR isn't good because it's 100 years old; WKAR is 100 years old because it's good at what it does.

And that's thanks, in large part, to you.

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*And that's thanks, in large part, to you.*



## 1917-22

Michigan Agricultural College students and a few faculty members begin tinkering with radio equipment on the top floor of the college's wood shop.



## 1922

On Aug. 18, MAC is granted a federal radio broadcast license with the randomly assigned call letters WKAR.



## 1923

The MAC Student Radio Committee convinces the college of the future value of radio. Funds are allocated to upgrade the station's equipment.

1920s

# Making the connection

**W**hen it officially went on the air in 1922, WKAR was the product of innovation. In 1917, as young soldiers returned to the Michigan Agricultural College campus in East Lansing, many were eager to tinker with the wireless transmission technology they'd encountered while serving in World War I.

Working out of the top floor of the college's wood shop, students and a few faculty members studied and experimented with the tubes, dials and wires needed to send messages via radio frequencies.

Their first broadcast might even have been accidental.

"Someone ... reversed the audio circuits in a super-heterodyne, fed their own voices back into the oscillator circuits and, with what other modifications I do not know, managed to transmit what they had to say," Fred-eric E. Holmes wrote in 1939.

"They were sure that the signal would not go beyond Wells Hall."

Holmes, a founding member of the college's Student Radio Committee, recalled

the students "sang several ribald songs." The next day, much to their surprise, they learned the program had been a successful broadcast, heard up to a radius of 15 miles from campus — infuriating some unsuspecting listeners with the off-color content.

"This almost killed broadcasting at MAC before it was born," Holmes wrote.

But that accidental success fueled those tinkerers, and the pursuit of radio broadcasting continued in earnest for five years.

Before it officially was granted its license, WKAR had what today we would call a "soft launch," broadcasting the college's Founders' Day speech by MAC President David Friday on May 13, 1922.



1925

"The Farm Service Hour" debuts, broadcasting weather forecasts and market reports to area farmers. Michigan Agricultural College becomes Michigan State College.



1929

On Oct. 29, the stock market crashes, launching the country into the Great Depression. Among so many other things, this changed how and what WKAR would broadcast to listeners.



*"There was much more enthusiasm evident in those days than there were skills or finesse."*

**Frederic E. Holmes, founding member,  
MAC Student Radio Committee**

Then, on Aug. 18, 1922, the college received its federal license to operate under the randomly assigned call letters of WKAR.

The transmitter was built by electrical engineering students, and the first studio operated out of 111 Olds Hall under the direction of J.B. "Jimmy" Hasselman.

One of WKAR's earliest innovations was figuring out how to broadcast live coverage of a basketball game.

In what's often cited as the first play-by-play radio broadcast on record in the United States, Hasselman called the game between MAC and the Mt. Pleasant Normal School (now Central Michigan University) live from the MAC women's gymnasium on Jan. 30, 1924. He transmitted his coverage

from inside an old telephone booth in the gym's balcony.

"We had the thrill of accomplishing this with make-shift equipment, of tearing everything and everybody loose on the campus to get through and feeling 'important as hell' in a telephone booth on the track at basketball games and lectures," Holmes wrote.

"Everything was pretty crude. We had no monitors. There was much more enthusiasm evident in those days than there were skills or finesse."

Innovation on a college campus was nothing new, of course, but it was clear this was an exciting development. At the time, MAC and WKAR were part of the first wave of radio broadcasters. In 1922, WKAR's license

was one of just 73 issued to educational institutions.

As the first agricultural college in the United States, MAC was deeply rooted in farming, and that would naturally shape WKAR's earliest programming.

In 1925, "The Farm Service Hour" aired at noon every weekday, offering weather forecasts and market reports to help farmers in the listening area make informed decisions about their work.

WKAR also offered "Farm School Radio," a way for farmers to take agricultural courses via radio — the first of its kind in the U.S. The nightly broadcasts covered everything from animal husbandry and veterinary medicine to gardening and home economics, all accessible from listeners' homes.

And all this innovation was happening on an incredibly limited broadcast schedule. WKAR was on the air an average of only about 7.5 hours a week. It wouldn't be until 1928 that the Federal Radio Commission would allow WKAR to broadcast from sunrise to sunset on its AM frequency.

That expansion enabled WKAR to continue to innovate and educate. Weather reports to benefit Michigan airmen were added to the schedule. Additional specialty courses could be delivered to listeners. By 1927, in a 16-week period, WKAR broadcast 320 lectures from 32 courses from across 20 departments in the college.

By the end of the 1920s, radio was an essential source of information — something that quickly became invaluable.



WKAR engineers build a new 1,000-watt transmitter, ultra modern and crystal-controlled. This enlarged the coverage area, particularly for the state's rural population.

For the first time, all football games were on the radio. Home games were broadcast live; away games used wire service copy to create reconstructions.

“College of the Air” is instituted. Instruction is broadcast directly from campus classes so residents can hear lectures and even take tests; however, no college credit is given.

[illegible]





## 1936

"Radio Reading Circle" debuts with the complete reading of Jane Austen's "Pride and Prejudice." The program, later called "The Radio Reader," would remain a fixture on WKAR for 80 years.



## 1939

WKAR is one of four outstanding educational stations given power increases to 5,000 watts, with programs airing from sunrise to sunset six days a week, year round.

*In 1936, a new transmitter and antenna system made it possible for people as far away as Wisconsin, Ohio, Indiana and Illinois to listen to WKAR.*

## Expanding educational programming at a crucial time

WKAR's ability to deliver access to college courses and information was unique

Access to information and education was essential in the 1930s. The Great Depression significantly curtailed — and often eliminated — resources and opportunities nationwide.

Because people were increasingly reliant on radio for information, in 1931, WKAR's engineers built a new 1,000-watt transmitter to increase the station's coverage area, particularly focused on reaching the state's rural population.

However, that same year, WKAR experienced its own crash of sorts: Due to the Great Depression, Michigan State College cut funding for radio programs, and the Federal Radio Commission restricted WKAR's broadcast hours to 30 minutes at noon and 30 minutes in the afternoon. The commission didn't feel the station was operating to the fullest extent in the "public interest, convenience and necessity."

Rather than be silenced, WKAR embarked on an expansion plan. In August 1934, Robert J. Coleman was

hired as the new station director. At the time, he was the business manager for the college's music department, and he also had experience at Ohio State's radio station as well as with the RCA Victor Company.

Coleman was dedicated to filling WKAR's broadcast schedule in support of its educational mission. Within six months of his appointment, WKAR's airtime doubled, and by June 1935, the station was airing 50 programs per week.

He would guide WKAR Radio until 1959.

WKAR's focus on education was invaluable in the 1930s. As a college-based broadcast station, "College of the Air" was a logical path for programming. Instruction was broadcast directly from campus classes, allowing residents to listen to lectures and even take tests from nine different courses, though no college credit was given.

In 1936, the station's frequency was changed to 870 where it still resides

today, and a new transmitter and antenna system made it possible for people as far away as Wisconsin, Ohio, Indiana and Illinois to listen to WKAR.

The fall of 1936 saw the debut of a novel idea: "Radio Reading Circle" began the verbatim readings of full-length books, kicking off with Jane Austen's "Pride and Prejudice." The program would remain a WKAR fixture for 80 years as it evolved to become "The Radio Reader," featuring the voice of Dick Estell and syndicated to stations nationwide.

The expansion of programming hours meant expanded, diverse educational opportunities. To the schedule already delivering farming and home economics programs, WKAR added symphonies, "Science News of the Week," "Harry Wismer's Spartan Sports Review," "The Inquiring Reporter" and "Michigan Department of Health," one of the station's longest-running series, providing weekly access to information from the state government office.



## 1940

WKAR moves into state-of-the-art facilities in the newly built MSC Auditorium Building and power increased to 5,000 watts with the new antenna and transmitter installed the previous year.



## 1941

WKAR partners with the Lansing State Journal to deliver four daily news broadcasts using the newspaper's wire services.



## 1943

WKAR installs its own wire service and begins airing five-minute newscasts hourly and three 15-minute newscasts daily.

### 1940s

# War news fills radio schedule

As the country emerged from the Great Depression, it wasn't long before another seismic shift arrived: World War II. And WKAR's role in disseminating information once again became vital to the community.

With the boost in power to the antenna and the relocation into a new, state-of-the-art studio in the MSC Auditorium Building — recently completed with Works Progress Administration funding — WKAR Radio was ready for its most important role yet.

The bombing of Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, shifted the station's priorities overnight. Farm, music and educational programs were reduced significantly to make room for broadcasts dedicated to war efforts.

For the next four and a half years, WKAR was at the disposal of Michigan's governor and the state's Civil Defense Council. Broadcasts were designed to keep listeners informed on the latest war news and how it was affecting them at home.

Even as it worked to support the community, WKAR was having difficulty supporting its own efforts. By the start of 1943, all but one of the station's operating staff and most of its student announcers had either enlisted or been drafted.

The end of the war in 1945 brought servicemembers home — and many staffers returned to WKAR as well. The station began airing new programs once again aimed at enriching listeners. From "Veterans Anonymous" to "Brides School of the Air" to "Trailer Town Talk" — examining apartment and Quonset hut living — WKAR delivered programming that tackled problems faced by postwar families.

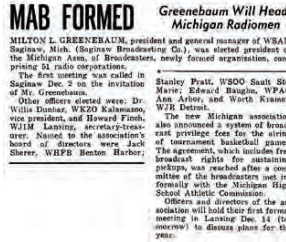
By the late 1940s, two major developments were on the horizon for the country and for WKAR. In 1947, WKAR applied for and was granted a permit to begin a noncommercial FM radio station. And in 1948, the college created the department of TV development, offering its first television training courses.





## 1948

On Oct. 4, WKAR FM goes on the air. During the day, it simulcast WKAR AM programs. When AM 870 signed off at sunset, WKAR FM continued to broadcast its own programs until 10 p.m.



## 1948

WKAR becomes a charter member of the Michigan Association of Broadcasters.



**BREAKING NEWS:**  
WKAR Radio staffers monitor national newswires and write stories to keep listeners updated on the latest war news.

## Educational efforts target key audiences for WKAR

### SWEET SUCCESS



In 1943, WKAR was the first to broadcast maple sugar bulletins, informing farmers throughout the state when to expect the first sap to run.

The service, produced in collaboration with the weather bureau and the department of forestry, helped jump Michigan to fourth in the nation in maple syrup production. Statewide income from syrup production shot to \$155,000 the year the bulletins debuted.

### 'RURAL MUSIC SCHOOL'



"Rural Music School" debuted, presenting a weekly exploration of different musical forms to more than 18,000 children across the state. With the start of the 1947-48 school year, the program had a new title — "Adventures in Music" — and it increased

its audience to 50,000 for its popular weekly Monday-morning broadcast. More than 8,000 elementary school children visited the WKAR studios and saw the program produced live throughout its run.

### THE WAVE OF THE FUTURE



In 1949, MSC President John Hannah appointed a television committee charged with investigating possible uses of the medium at the college. It recommended the college should get into television in a small way with a modest studio. The committee found that TV facilities at MSC would assist and promote the development of a college-wide audio-visual aid program and would strengthen the college's national position in the field of mass communications. A faculty search committee was appointed to look for a director of television development.





1951

Armand L. Hunter is named director of TV development. Hunter was a national authority on educational television. He was named director of WKAR TV in 1953 and director of broadcasting services in 1958.



1952

Kinescope recording equipment was purchased in early 1952, enabling TV Development to make film recordings directly from the studio productions and save them for future local broadcasts.



1953

WKAR FM expands its Sunday broadcasts by offering two additional hours of classical music beginning at 10 a.m., with minimal announcements.

1950s

# A revolution in broadcasting

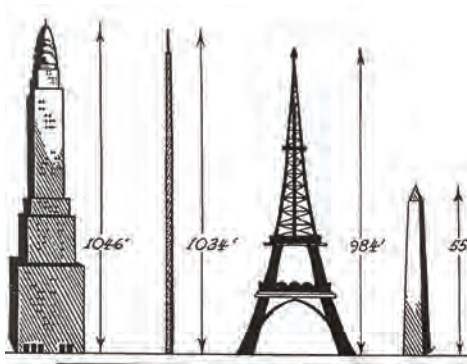
*"Television is the greatest tool ever devised to carry out the program of education for all the people."*

*John Hannah, MSC President*

At the start of the 1950s, while WKAR continued offering its airwaves to local, state and federal offices to deliver Korean War news, the station refocused on its educational roots. "College of the Air" expanded its content and reached broader audiences. Programs such as "Adventures in Research," "Journey Behind the News" and "Current Affairs Forum" filled the AM radio schedule.

An emphasis on inspiring programming emerged as well with shows such as "Hymns You Love," "Music Hall Varieties" and "BBC Theater" joining the lineup. And WKAR FM expanded its Sunday broadcasts on April 12, 1953, by offering two additional hours of classical music.

Innovation also was happening at a rapid pace. In 1952, WKAR AM 870



celebrated its 30th anniversary, and the FCC authorized the construction of the college's new educational television station on UHF Channel 60. The station's 1,034-foot broadcast tower was erected in 1953; at the time, it was the third-tallest structure in the world, only eclipsed by the Empire State and Chrysler buildings in New York City.

At 1 p.m. on Jan. 15, 1954, WKAR TV went on the air live with the national anthem, followed by the news and "Program Vignettes," becoming the first educational TV station in Michigan and the third in the nation. The first day's programming included "Symphony Note Book," "Driver Education" and "How to Catch a Cold."

Upon the launch of WKAR TV, MSC President John Hannah said, "The purpose of Michigan State College when it was established 100 years ago was to help the people of Michigan learn to live more effectively and to learn to live more enjoyable lives. Television is the greatest tool ever devised to carry out the program of education for all the people."

It's important to remember that not only does WKAR TV's history predate

## BE READY FOR



## 1954

WKAR TV first goes on the air, with studios housed in three WWII-era Quonset huts at the corner of Kalamazoo Street and Harrison Road. WKAR originally broadcast over UHF Channel 60. At the time, 84% of Lansing-area homes had a TV, though 20% of the sets could only receive one channel.



## 1959

In an effort to boost WKAR's TV reach beyond the limits of its UHF signal on Channel 60, the station began broadcasting as WMSB TV on VHF Channel 10 in a unique, shared-time arrangement with the Jackson-based commercial station WILX TV. WMSB provided elementary in-class instruction with its "Classroom 10" series among its new programming.



the creation of PBS, it also was created before what would become the National Educational Television network. That meant almost every program it aired was live and locally produced.

At the end of WWII, MSC brought 104 steel Quonset huts to campus to house returning veterans and, sometimes, their families. When married housing complexes were built, many of the Quonset huts were torn down, but three were relocated to the corner of Kalamazoo Street and Harrison Road in the northwest corner of campus and became the new home for WKAR TV.

While curved metal roofs didn't equate with excellent sound quality for television, the buildings were a bit of a luxury. Having multiple dedicated studios to create local programming was essential to its early efforts.

During its first year of operation, the station produced more than 35 hours of weekly programming, with 80% of the schedule originating from one of the three Quonset hut studios. Only stations owned and operated by networks in major markets such as New York City and Chicago produced more live hours of programming than WKAR TV.

Efforts to inform, inspire and educate audiences fueled WKAR's innovation in the 1950s, particularly in two areas that would prove to be cornerstones of WKAR's content: children's programming and fine arts series and specials.

WKAR TV's dedication to providing quality entertaining and educational children's shows filled a void left open by commercial broadcasters. Shows such as "Mr. Murgle's Musee"

explained the wonders of the world through the art of puppetry to youngsters not only in mid-Michigan but nationally — it was one of more than two dozen WKAR programs selected for distribution to educational TV stations across the country, amplifying the station's educational mission.

And with the arrival of Don Pash, WKAR TV fine arts producer, audiences found inspiration from classical music series showcasing the MSC School of Music's faculty and students. Fine arts programming quickly became a respected and significant part of WKAR production.

Pash's tenure would last 35 years and produce more than 1,000 programs, exhibiting such high standards that many of WKAR's fine arts programs were distributed nationwide.



## 1960

WKAR begins experimenting with stereophonic sound by simulcasting concerts on FM 90.5 and AM 870. Instructions were printed in the program guide explaining to listeners how to achieve this new experience via two radios spaced six feet apart.



## 1964

Michigan State University is admitted to the American Association of Universities.



## 1965

WKAR AM and FM split their programming and broadcast schedules. WKAR FM becomes a dedicated fine arts station, carrying programming from 6:30 a.m. to midnight.

1960s

# Technology boosts access



STANDING BY:

*A director oversees production from the Studio A control room.*

The advances in technology that came with the 1960s meant WKAR could leverage its established status to help build programming across the country.

In 1960, WKAR expanded its Tape Network Service (TNS). At the time — well before instant satellite and internet transmission were available — stations generally produced the bulk of their own programming or had to arrange to “borrow” programming from other stations. WKAR Radio produced a large number of programs, and through TNS it had the ability to duplicate and send as many as 80 copies of one program across the country by mail or bus. TNS enabled WKAR to be instrumental in helping other stations fulfill their licensing agreements and remain on the air for their required number of hours.

On the TV side, federal legislation was enacted requiring all television receivers manufactured after April 30, 1964, to be equipped to receive Channels 2 through 83. By May, television dealers were showing the new “all 83-channel” sets, which would be essential in WMSB’s quest to secure its own separate TV broadcasting channel apart from its shared space on Channel 10 with WILX and return to being WKAR.

The 1960s also saw a rapid expansion of educational children’s programming that WKAR — and eventually PBS — would be known for producing. Preschoolers found entertainment and education through shows such as “Land of Play,” “Muffinland,” “Mr. Lister’s Storytime” and more. “Culver’s Clubhouse” focused on kids ages 8-12, teaching them to be curious, friendly and resourceful under the guidance of host Jim Culver, a communications major at Michigan State. And “Michigan Youth Forum” offered a monthly discussion by and for teens.

By expanding its broadcast signals for both radio and television, WKAR ensured access to education, information and inspiration in ways it couldn’t achieve previously.





## 1967

The Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 is signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson, allocating federal funds for public TV and radio. The act created the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) which would eventually establish PBS and NPR.



## 1969

By now, 95% of homes have TV sets, and 45% are color TVs. PBS incorporates, and CPB debuts a new children's program — "Sesame Street."



## Focus on women

Using technology to address contemporary issues

From its earliest schedules, WKAR broadcast programs specifically for female listeners and viewers, attempting to address contemporary issues and problems.

On the radio side, the first programs dealing with home economics were broadcast as early as 1925 as part of the station's short-course series. Later, home economics programs were featured regularly on the station's "Radio School." When WKAR began to use all its allotted daylight broadcast hours in 1930, one of the first series aired was the daily "Homemakers Hour," launching the station's women's department.

By the 1960s on TV, women could access information and education through programs such as "Choice: Challenge for Modern Woman," "Stitch with Style" and "All Things Considered" — not the NPR news show, but a program using university and community resources to inform women about events and issues of the day.



## Sports coverage

Connecting fans to their favorite teams

Long before the emergence of ESPN and the Big Ten Network, WKAR created a network of stations to broadcast games statewide, using technology to connect sports fans with the teams they have loved for decades.

From basketball and football home games broadcast live from campus to time-delayed coverage of away games, WKAR was the go-to source for Spartan sports fans.

By the mid 1970s, WKAR had one of the most prestigious reputations for providing sports coverage in the Big Ten. Coverage included 65 play-by-play broadcasts including 27 hockey games from the new Clarence Munn Ice Arena and four in-depth sportscasts each weekday.

On TV, "Spartan Sportlite" debuted in the mid-1960s, with Jim Adams and Terry Braverman offering an inside look at MSU athletics. It was one of the station's longest-running, locally produced programs, airing until 1982.

# THE NEXT GENERATION IN MEDIA

Storytelling connects us all, and WKAR has been delivering dynamic and inspiring stories on an array of platforms since 1922.

That storytelling has been fueled by the experimentation and creativity of students.

In its earliest days of radio, students at Michigan Agricultural College worked alongside faculty to develop the technology that would broadcast news and information to the community.

Students challenged WKAR to offer programming that represented diverse voices and ideas on its airwaves.

Students pitched specials, wrote and directed programs, and hosted some of WKAR's most popular shows.

Throughout its first 100 years, WKAR has been proud to nurture tomor-

row's storytellers for an ever-changing media landscape, providing them with unique experiential learning opportunities spanning traditional and emerging media while working alongside award-winning professionals.

In the next 100 years, as technology advances at an even faster rate, the heart of what WKAR delivers will still be driven by skillful storytelling.

No matter how the content is produced, broadcast and received, the stories must be compelling, relevant, representational and accessible.

Through the next 100 years, WKAR will continue to work with students to give them the training and experience

they need to become the next generation of storytellers ... and the next ... and the next.

Their diverse voices and experiences will tell the stories of our next century.

And, as with generations before them, these students will take their training far beyond the MSU campus and out into the world. They will continue to witness history, shape narratives and move audiences through their work in journalism, film, broadcasting, digital content and in ways and on platforms we haven't yet imagined.

The skills students acquire throughout their time with WKAR have been and continue to be invaluable.









## 1970

WKAR becomes a charter member of National Public Radio (NPR), a new, noncommercial program network. WKAR's Dick Estell was a key player in NPR's incorporation, and his popular show "The Radio Reader" was one of the first programs carried by NPR.



## 1972

WMSB's shared arrangement with WILX on Channel 10 ends when MSU's station is moved to UHF Channel 23 full time as WKAR TV.



## 1973

Radio Reading Service, WKAR's broadcast service for those who have difficulty using printed materials, debuts on a sub-channel of WKAR's FM signal. Listeners use a special, pre-set receiver to tune in.



Hear every voice  
**1970s**





1975

PBS created its first coordinated pledge drive, offering special programs for stations to broadcast while raising funds to support operations and programming. WKAR TV held its first on-air fundraising and public awareness campaign.



1977

“High School Quiz Bowl” debuts, featuring 16 teams competing. The series later inspired the creation of WKAR’s long-running academic competition, “QuizBusters.”

*In 1971, a group of MSU students approached the TV station about its lack of programming for the Black community. “Perspectives in Black” was a direct result of that conversation.*

## Public broadcasting grows more inclusive

Programming expands to highlight diverse voices, dynamic arts programs and community engagement

With the founding of PBS on Nov. 3, 1969, and the founding of NPR on Feb. 26, 1970, WKAR became part of a growing network of TV and radio stations dedicated to informing, educating and inspiring viewers and listeners with an ever-broadening scope of content.

As a charter member station of NPR, WKAR’s news resources expanded tenfold, freeing local reporting staff to cover events and issues relevant to listeners in the surrounding communities. In the 1970s, WKAR Radio aired 49 weekly newscasts ranging from 5 to 15 minutes, including a midnight newscast on WKAR FM which was added to serve late-night listeners.

On the television side, the shared agreement between WMSB and WILX ended in 1972, allowing WMSB to return to operation as WKAR on Channel 23 and expand its broadcast hours and variety of programs.

These shifts in radio and television included the important addition of

programming for the region’s Hispanic and Black communities.

“TeleRevista” on WKAR TV and “Variedades en Español” (later “Ondas en Español”) on WKAR Radio offered information and entertainment for the Spanish-speaking community. At the time, the programs were among the very few shows created by and designed for Hispanic audiences.

WKAR Radio debuted “Takin’ Care of Business” in 1970, presenting news, information and music produced by and for the community’s Black listeners.

In 1971, a group of MSU students approached the TV station about its lack of programming for the Black community. “Perspectives in Black” was a direct result of that conversation — it became a weekly series with a community forum and conversations with nationally known guests including Coretta Scott King, Angela Davis, entertainer Flip Wilson and Georgia Rep. Andrew Young.

Performing arts programming also expanded significantly in the 1970s, fueled by award-winning specials produced by Don Pash. WKAR TV became known throughout the PBS system as a station that produced and distributed more quality music presentations than any other single station among the 227 public TV outlets.

WKAR produced programs featuring artists including opera singers Kathleen Battle and Jessye Norman, cellist Yo-Yo Ma, pianist Emanuel Ax and more — many of whom had their national television debut on WKAR on their way to international acclaim.

The 1970s also saw the debut of an icon in WKAR TV history. The weekly public affairs show “Off the Record” debuted on Feb. 2, 1972, and became required viewing for anyone interested in state politics. The program was — and still is — moderated by Tim Skubick and features members of the Michigan State Capitol press corps discussing issues and interviewing politicians.



1981

WKAR TV and Radio move into the newly constructed Communication Arts and Sciences Building on campus, with dedicated, expanded, state-of-the-art broadcast facilities.



1983

"Morning Editing from East Lansing" hosted by Irene Doyle becomes the AM station's first listener call-in program. In 1984, "Afternoon Edition" hosted by Steve Jensen debuts as the second call-in show.



1985

WKAR-AM debuts its News/Talk 870 format, expanding the station's weekday programming from 9.5 to 13 hours per day, including sports shows with Jim Adams and Earle Robinson (pictured).

1980s: CONNECTING WITH THE COMMUNITY IN NEW WAYS

# Everyone has a role

From the station's beginning in 1922, the community has played a significant role in WKAR's mission and its content. Serving as the source of education, information and inspiration for listeners and viewers meant paying close attention to what those people wanted and needed from their public media stations.

By the 1980s, WKAR had created several new ways for the mid-Michigan community to support and be supported by their favorite sources of public media.

## The Great TV Auction

In April of 1978, before there was the Home Shopping Network or eBay, WKAR TV debuted a new kind of on-air fundraiser: The Great TV Auction. Each April, viewers could tune in to "watch, bid and buy," as the slogan said.

Businesses would donate goods and services to the station, and for several days live on the air each April, WKAR staff and volunteers worked together to auction off the items to raise money.

"An auction is a natural for television and gives all bidders an equal opportunity to

examine merchandise and participate in a non-intimidating bidding process," WKAR station manager Bob Page told the Lansing State Journal in 1978.

In its early years, the Auction was staged in Michigan State's Demonstration Hall because the station's Quonset hut studios weren't large enough for the size and scope of the production. The building, which served as an ROTC training space and a hockey rink, among other functions, was hardly built for TV production. When WKAR moved into the newly constructed Communication Arts and Sciences Building in 1981, the wide-open expanse of Studio A became Auction's chaotic-yet-comfortable stage each spring.

WKAR's Auction aired for 30 years, made possible by the





1987

Don Pash, WKAR TV's fine arts producer since 1954, produces his 1,000th program and retires.



1989

"QuizBusters" debuts. The high school quiz bowl-style show is hosted by Matt Ottinger. "QuizBusters" would run for 29 seasons and feature thousands of students competing for fun, pride and prizes — including MSU scholarships.



*"Trying to tell the public what a television auction is like is as difficult as describing a circus to an uninitiated 3-year-old."*

**Barb Sutton, WKAR TV Auction Coordinator, as told to the Lansing State Journal in 1978**

tireless staff and student employees, literally thousands of community volunteers, and hundreds of businesses donating countless items to be sold on live TV.

By the time Auction ended in 2007, generations of community members had been shoppers or supporters — and often both — raising millions of dollars for WKAR programming.

### Interactive radio

In the 1980s, national programming broadcast over WKAR Radio was growing in popularity, and so was the demand to experience it live beyond simply tuning in from home or the car.

The megahit weekly series

"A Prairie Home Companion" came to Lansing for a live broadcast in 1981, selling out Lansing Eastern High School. Appearing with host Garrison Keillor onstage were Lansing-area folksingers Sally Rogers, Joel Mabus and the Lost World String Band. The show was broadcast live nationwide, thanks to WKAR's satellite uplink facilities.

When NPR aired a radio adaptation of "The Empire Strikes Back" in 1983, WKAR hosted "Coloring, Costumes and Darth Vader Day" at Impression 5 Science Center, with more than 1,400 children and adults on hand to meet Darth Vader and help kick off the broadcast premiere.

Opportunities to experience WKAR Radio events

in person gave community members an important connection to the station and, in turn, helped WKAR better serve its audiences.

### Public service television

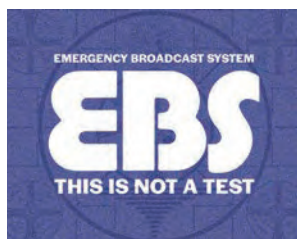
Programs produced by PBS and by WKAR in the 1980s continued efforts to deliver relevant news and information to viewers with a particular focus on public affairs.

In 1983, WKAR joined with PBS for its first national community educational outreach project to combat drug and alcohol abuse among youth with "The Chemical People." The project included airing a statewide forum focusing on the issue as well as a mid-Michigan follow-up.

Later that year, the station launched its first local-only outreach project, a five-part series, "Alcoholism: Breaking the Silence."

This led to the creation of other public affairs programs that highlighted crucial conversations.

In the late 1980s and into the 1990s, series such as "Michigan at Risk," "Your Voice Counts" and "Streetwatch Lansing" (a local spinoff of the national series "Streetwatch") featured information and analysis about key issues facing the community and allowed viewers to participate — either through studio audience questions or call-in shows — giving them a voice in the conversations.



1991

WKAR Radio is selected as the primary relay station for tests and/or actual warnings issued through Michigan's Emergency Broadcast System to other area stations throughout the state.



1992

The WKAR TV Auction celebrates its 15th anniversary. More than 25,000 community members have lent support, contributing 100,000+ hours of service.



1993

Jim Adams, WKAR sports director, retires after 30 years. During his lifetime, Adams provided play-by-play coverage of more than 1,500 Spartan athletic contests.

1990s

# The dawn of digital delivery

The 1990s saw rapid advancements in how technology helped WKAR deliver its trusted programming to listeners and viewers.

In 1995, WKAR launched [www.wkar.msu.edu](http://www.wkar.msu.edu), its first website, and began sharing news, information and expanded content online with listeners and viewers who had access to the burgeoning internet.

The decade's technological innovation shaped how the WKAR staff worked as well. Radio news interviews that once required a bulky recorder and endless yards of audio tape that had to be physically cut now could be captured and trimmed digitally. Mouse clicks replaced razor blades as editing tools, streamlining the process and significantly lightening the load of reporters.

On the music side of production, digital audio tape replaced old reel-to-reel tapes in the control room, and the emergence of CDs meant the storage space was suddenly able to hold two or three times more media than with previous formats. Technology advances also meant overnight content could be programmed, so control board operators didn't need to work the graveyard shift.

Tech was streamlined in TV production as well. In 1995, the FCC established digital television transmission standards, though it would still be a number of years before the standards reached home viewers.

In 1996, WKAR TV added a second cable channel, 'KAR2, offering additional programs and time-shifted replays of PBS



children's shows in the evenings so parents and kids could watch them together.

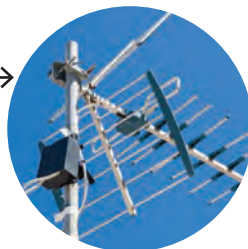
By the late 1990s, HDTV was on the horizon, and WKAR helped educate the community about its coming benefits. In 1998, WKAR hosted the DTV express, a road show sponsored by the Michigan Association of Public Broadcasters. It brought a 66-foot-long truck that allowed guests to experience the new world of digital television, including a first look at the crisp, beautiful images we see everywhere today.





1994

WKAR earns its first regional Emmy Award when fine arts producer Eric Schultz won in the Cultural Affairs category for "Gil Shaham: Violin." The next year, Nancy Kelly won a regional Emmy in the audio category for "The Chenille Sisters: Makin' Rhythm."



1996

FCC establishes digital transmission standards, setting the stage for more choices in video programming with dramatically better visual and audio resolution.

**LEFT:**

When WKAR's first website went live in 1995, it was found at [www.wkar.msu.edu](http://www.wkar.msu.edu). It looked a good deal different than it does today, but at the time it was an exciting new way for the community to connect with WKAR. Today, [wkar.org](http://wkar.org) lets visitors stream shows, listen live to radio broadcasts and find expanded content to enhance their experiences with programming.

**BELOW:**

Beany Tomber led WKAR's Ready To Learn efforts, expanding access to education for mid-Michigan's preschool and early elementary children and their families and caregivers. In the early years of RTL, WKAR held dozens of in-person workshops and events to help the community connect with resources. The work continues today.



## Ready To Learn

Program helps children prepare for success at school

Regardless of the state of technology, educating listeners and viewers of all ages has always been a key component of WKAR's mission.

Access to education for the region's youngest learners got an enormous boost in the mid-1990s when the U.S. Department of Education began funding Ready To Learn, a program targeting preschool and early elementary children and their families and caregivers, especially those living in low-income communities.

Ready To Learn (RTL) was designed to support millions of children lacking the basic early learning skills to succeed in school. WKAR launched the program locally in 1996, led by Beany Tomber.

WKAR partnered with the state's Office for Young Children to present workshops in a four-county area demonstrating strategies for using public television children's programs as learning tools. RTL also joined

forces with the Capital Area Literacy Coalition and the Capital Area District Libraries as part of the "first book" program and hosted events with storytellers and costumed PBS characters each year.

The workshops focus on tips for becoming media-literate viewers such as choosing specific programs, watching with children, and limiting screen time. Strategies are provided on how to use the programs to encourage activities and reading once the TV is turned off, reinforcing the lessons.

RTL has been funded through WKAR's budget, grants from corporations and foundations, and grants from PBS and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

And RTL continues today, fueled by community partnerships with local libraries, literacy coalitions, higher education and Head Start programs, helping the next generation of learners grow and succeed.





## 2000

The WKAR TV Auction unveils its first Premiere Collection: "Cranes in Flight," an original commissioned oil painting by local artist Gijsbert van Frankenhuyzen. The painting and several prints were auctioned off to benefit the station.



## 2000

WKAR TV aired the pledge special "Spartan Basketball: 100 Years of the Green and White," and welcomed Coach Tom Izzo as a special guest — less than a month before he led the team to the national championship.



## 2002

In the months following the 9/11 attacks, WKAR airs "ZOOM Into Action" videos, saluting volunteer achievements of local youth. WKAR's segments aired as part of the national PBS broadcast of "ZOOM."

## 2000s

# Evolving platforms

*Digital upgrade: Installation of WKAR's first digital television broadcast antenna was completed in 2003. Capable of broadcasting analog and digital signals, the antenna was an essential component of the system that would launch WKAR's digital TV broadcasts in 2004, while maintaining the traditional television broadcasts through the transition from analog to digital in the years that followed.*



You can't talk about the 2000s without discussing the terror attacks on Sept. 11, 2001.

Local and national programming from WKAR, NPR and PBS reflected and analyzed the news and information surrounding 9/11. For local audiences:

- WKAR TV's on-air membership drive was canceled in favor of airing topical programs, national town meetings, news and in-depth conversations.
- A program designed for parents to provide ways to talk with their children about the terrorist attacks aired five times.
- A local televised town meeting discussed 9/11 in front of an audience of community members and representatives from the health, law enforcement, military and religious communities.

The new millennium also brought the implementation of the promise from the late 1990s: The debut of digital television broadcasting.

At 11:07:25 a.m. on Jan. 15, 2004, WKAR DT began digital transmission on Channel 55 — marking the exact time and day the first test pattern aired on WKAR TV UHF Channel 60 in 1954, 50 years earlier.

Digital transmission also offered the launch of two subchannels with specialty lineups — WKAR World broadcast on 23.2 and WKAR Create aired on 23.3.

Digital technology also offered some of the earliest opportunities for what has become commonplace today: time-shifted listening and viewing. Webcasting allowed people to watch local shows including "Off the Record," "Michigan at Risk" and "QuizBusters" online, on their own schedule. And conversations that would surpass the constraints of programming time slots could continue online after broadcasts concluded.



## 2004

On Jan. 15, 2004, WKAR TV celebrated its 50th anniversary. The station marked the occasion with the launch of its new digital channel, going live at the exact moment it went on the air in 1954.



## 2007

After 30 years of donations, deals and organized chaos, the last WKAR TV Auction airs.



## Awards and honors

Original programming earns recognition for TV

WKAR has received numerous awards throughout its history, and in the 2000s, honors continued to roll in.

"Michigan At Risk" received its first regional Emmy Award for Outstanding Public Affairs Program (above). The program won for the episode "Dying for a Drink," focused on the increase of youth binge drinking in Michigan. It had been nominated 11 times before winning in 2000.

In 2002, audio engineer Nancy Kelly took home her second regional Emmy for her work on WKAR's program "The Gardens: Birth of a Symphony." In 1998, MSU's School of Music commissioned Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Ellen Taaffe Zwilich to write a symphony celebrating the university's renowned gardens. Zwilich was the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize in music. The special documented the process and features the stirring score throughout. It's available for streaming at [video.wkar.org](http://video.wkar.org).



## Taking the national stage

'BackStage Pass' puts spotlight on Michigan talent

In January 2009, WKAR TV debuted a series that would quickly grow beyond mid-Michigan.

"BackStage Pass" features live studio performances, behind-the-scenes footage and exclusive interviews. In each episode, artists reveal their inspiration behind the music. Since its debut, more than 100 acts have been featured on the series.

The show is distributed by the National Educational Television Association (NETA) to public broadcasting stations across the country, giving a national stage to mid-Michigan talent. More than 72% of public broadcasting stations in the U.S. have carried the series, with more than 26,000 airings in markets from New York to Los Angeles.

"BackStage Pass" has been honored with eight Broadcast Excellence Awards from the Michigan Association of Broadcasters and six Regional Emmy nominations.



## 2011

WKAR's broadcast tower gets a much-needed upgrade. Constructed alongside the original tower built in 1953, the new structure better supported the new digital antenna and transmission systems.



## 2013

"Current Sports with Al Martin" launches on WKAR, following in the storied footsteps of WKAR sports giants Jim Adams, Terry Braverman and Earle Robinson.



## 2014

"Curious Crew" debuts featuring award-winning educator Rob Stephenson and a cast of inquisitive kids as they take a hands-on approach to scientific exploration.

2010s

# Exploring new technologies

*"For the first time, we can broadcast to any connected device."*

**Susi Elkins, WKAR general manager, 2017-2022**

WKAR was innovative from its very beginning simply because it existed.

The students and faculty who started tinkering with wires and equipment were working to create something new — broadcast radio for public education. Throughout its history, that spirit of innovation has driven WKAR to deliver the next, newest, most accessible media platform.

In the 2010s, that came in the form of ATSC 3.0, or NextGen TV.

Just as Michigan Agricultural College applied for and was granted the license to launch WKAR Radio in 1922, Michigan State University and WKAR were granted a license from the FCC in 2018 to launch an experimental broadcasting station focused on internet-based connectivity.



WKAR was the first public broadcaster in the U.S. to receive this authorization. To study the technology, MSU opened the NextGen Media Innovation Lab, a new research facility on campus. The lab has an emphasis on outcomes related to education and public media content — something that has always been part of WKAR's mission.

"NextGen TV has a lot of benefits. For the first time, we can broadcast to

any connected device," former WKAR General Manager Susi Elkins said. "Traditionally, broadcasters could transmit to a television set that was tuned in to accept your signal. We didn't have the same kind of access to cell phones."

Now, stations can create something once and deliver it to numerous platforms, letting the technology determine the format for everything from TVs and phones to connected refrigerators and cars.

"And it will all be available without paying for extra services, which is really important to public broadcasters," Elkins said.

With innovation comes the ability to continue expanding the education, information and inspiration the community has come to expect from WKAR.



→ **ONDAS EN  
ESPAÑOL**

2014

"Ondas en Español," mid-Michigan's only Spanish-language program, celebrates 40 years on the air. Host El Chayo Cervantes was with the radio series from its earliest days.



2017

WKAR TV adds a fourth channel: WKAR PBS KIDS<sup>SM</sup> 24/7 (23.4), making it easier for mid-Michigan kids to watch their favorite series after school and in prime time.

FORTE

CURIOUS CREW

CURRENT STATE

# 2020-today: Pandemic shifts

The 2020s — almost immediately — required new ways of working, connecting and communicating.

When the COVID-19 pandemic brought so much to a halt in March 2020, closing schools and businesses, sending people to quarantine in their homes, WKAR shifted resources and adjusted priorities to launch a number of new initiatives to help the community navigate the truly unprecedented times.



## Information

As COVID-19 spread through Michigan, so did confusion and concern. People were navigating a complex pandemic in isolation, with heightened anxiety and uncertainty.

WKAR Radio launched a blog with real-time updates in English and Spanish, delivering crucial health and safety information to the community.

Shawn Turner, a strategic communications professor and analyst for CNN, anchored “COVID-19: Answers and Insight,” a weekly series of round-table discussions with experts to provide the public with accurate, timely information.



## Education

With schools closed for an unknown period of time, families and educators faced challenges they had never navigated.

Through a new at-home learning initiative, WKAR quickly began delivering trusted resources from PBS, PBS KIDS and WKAR Family to help keep kids playing and learning at home, and offering free educator resources for teachers and parents.

Robin Pizzo, WKAR’s director of education, enhanced outreach efforts through WKAR Family Workshops with Mrs. Pizzo and a weekly blog answering questions about how to teach at home.



## Inspiration

Many cultural organizations canceled live performances out of concern for public health and instead chose to livestream them from empty venues. WKAR Radio’s effort to keep audiences updated about concerts from Detroit to Berlin was even noticed by the New York Times.

Offering uninterrupted access to music turned out to be more essential than many people imagined. Listeners — many of whom were isolated and alone at home — were quick to reach out to WKAR staff with gratitude for offering peace and comfort through music over the air.



## Innovation

While WKAR’s staff was working from home — just as so many Michiganders were — local TV and radio programming continued, largely uninterrupted.

WKAR’s flagship public affairs program, “Off the Record,” moved its in-studio panel discussions to a format that respected social distancing guidelines. Host Tim Skubick and his Capitol press corps colleagues continued to bring viewers essential information and analysis about the political and economic impact of a statewide shutdown throughout the pandemic.

2020s

# Growing to meet the community's needs

*As WKAR Public Media rounds out its first 100 years, it continues to expand its reach*

Alongside the nimble work being done to navigate the coronavirus pandemic, progress in programming continued at WKAR in the 2020s.

WKAR Radio created the position of Latinx stories reporter, hiring Michelle Jokisch Polo to fill that role in 2020.

Jokisch Polo actively engaged Latinx communities, sharing stories with a broader audience about the struggle of Spanish-speaking business owners during the pandemic, and how undocumented immigrants formed learning pods so parents could continue to work while children learned virtually.

Working with Karel Vega, WKAR News managing editor, Jokisch Polo also launched “¿Qué Onda Michigan?,” a weekly Spanish-language news podcast covering the top headlines of the week with a focus on the people and the issues most important to Michigan’s Latinx community.

In 2021, WKAR continued its work as a leader in ATSC 3.0 broadcasting



**Michelle Jokisch Polo**

and NextGen TV innovation to benefit public broadcasting in communities across the nation. WKAR’s NextGen Media Innovation Lab on MSU’s campus is a hub for exploring NextGen TV applications for public alerting, educational content and fundraising for public broadcasters.

WKAR Public Media was part of a coronavirus response grant initiative that brought together Capital Area Community Services Inc. Head Start

and Early Childhood Development, PNC Foundation and Impression 5 Science Center to benefit local children and their families. The grant funded monthly at-home, play-based learning kits for more than 1,600 Ingham County Head Start families, featuring key early childhood education resources supporting literacy and math, and building lasting social and emotional skills.

In 2021, WKAR Public Media joined other Michigan public television stations to launch the Michigan Learning Channel, a statewide public television partnership offering instructional content to support the education of students and provide alternative resources for families and teachers.

Developed in partnership with respected educators and community leaders, the network delivers instructional content and programming to students, parents and teachers. Locally, it’s broadcast over the air on channel 23.5, and it’s also available as a live TV stream at [MichiganLearning.org](https://MichiganLearning.org).



# THE NEXT CENTURY OF SERVICE

WKAR's first 100 years saw tremendous strides in innovation, bold inspiration and essential education. Up next?

Community and accessibility are embedded in WKAR's mission, and in the next 100 years — starting now — that mission will drive innovation in technology and content on every platform.

WKAR has long said, "We're here for you because of you," and it's true. As mid-Michigan's public media organization, it's imperative WKAR's services and programming are meeting the community's needs.

What will that look like? It's hard to say for certain; look how much we didn't know and couldn't predict when the COVID-19 pandemic changed everything. Still, there are efforts underway to experiment with innovative ideas:

- ATSC 3.0 — NextGen TV — is evolving rapidly to deliver easily accessible, high-quality, over-the-air broadcasting so every household can receive the most up-to-date, comprehensive information, education and entertainment.
- WKAR continues to grow its education services to support families, teachers and learners of all ages. Ongoing Ready To Learn programs throughout the community are helping mid-Michigan families prepare children to become successful learners. WKAR Family offers local and national access to education resources and agencies. PBS KIDS partnerships engage families in fun,

educational activities to encourage lifelong learning. This commitment to education will evolve as our community's needs grow throughout the next century.

- And, as you listen to us on the air and online, WKAR will continue to listen to you to help pave the way for the next chapters.

Calling this our Century of Service was not taken lightly. WKAR is deeply grateful for the trust this community has in us to work every day to inform, educate and inspire everyone in our community. We look forward to serving you and future generations for centuries to come.







## **WKAR Public Media**

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WKAR's Century of Service celebration is generously supported by MSU Federal Credit Union, our longtime community partner.

MSUFCU was established 85 years ago to provide a safe place where members could borrow and save money. Today, the mission remains unchanged as our employees build relationships with our members to help them achieve financial security, their goals, and ultimately, their dreams.

MSUFCU is the lead underwriter of WKAR's Century of Service.

