

Raycom's Rick Ray: The best laid plans sometimes work out

Rick Ray is a planner. A testament to the success of his plans is Raycom, the company he founded in 1979. Headquartered in Charlotte, N.C., Raycom lays claim to being the largest syndicator of sports programming, covering some 50% of the country. Ray is now setting his sights on expanding the company with more entertainment programming and from there, developing Raycom into a regional network. It wasn't what he had in mind when he started.

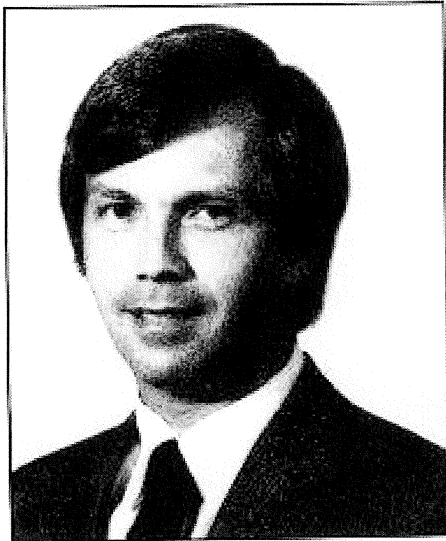
"My original goal was to become an actor," says Ray, "I started training at the age of 11 and eventually did some work in summer stock and road companies throughout college, but all my friends were going to New York and starving as actors. I decided I would prefer to finish college, get a degree and start out working in a television station and wait to get my big break."

The opportunity came in 1971, while he was working at WCCB-TV Charlotte, N.C. "The big break I had been waiting for was the 5:55 a.m. weather, and I stress a.m.; that's when I decided that there might be something better for me to do." At the time, Ray was also responsible for typing program schedules; it was that clerical duty that led him to the programming side of television.

"Eventually I became program director because no one wanted to make the decisions about our scheduling," he says. "One day I asked what they wanted in the schedule and they said: 'Why don't you decide. It'll be OK.' So I started making decisions and was actually pretty good at it." So good that he became the station's program director.

In 1974, Ray moved to WCSC-TV Charleston, S.C., as program director. Within a year, he was named station manager. He was all of 22. "I left WCCB-TV," he says "because I was looking to get varied experience; my plan was to stay at each place for about three years, long enough to learn and gain the experience and then move on. When I came to WCSC-TV, it was on somewhat of a downward trend and eventually we gained a 56 share. Luckily everything that I did succeeded."

It was during his tenure at WCSC-TV that Ray learned the value of research and trend-watching in making program decisions. "I would study the books, examining why certain shows were or were not successful in specific markets, and our staff conducted audience surveys, sometimes on a daily basis; this was at a time when not many people did that. Many people at the time were making program decisions by saying: 'This looks like a good show, let's play it.'" One of Ray's programming decisions was to buy *M*A*S*H* in syndication. "When I bought *M*A*S*H*, everybody thought I was crazy,



WILLIAM ERIC (RICK) RAY—CEO and founder of Raycom Sports, Charlotte, N.C.; b. Dec. 15, 1949, Asheville, N.C.; BA, radio, television and motion pictures, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1971; program director, WCCB-TV, Charlotte, N.C., 1971-74; program director and station manager, WCSC-TV, Charleston, S.C., 1974-76; program director and station manager, WRAL-TV, Raleigh, N.C., 1976-78; station manager, WCCB-TV, 1978-79; founded Raycom Sports, 1979; m. Dee Birke, Feb. 2, 1980; children: Deanna, 7 months; Billy, 12 (from previous marriage).

because I spent almost \$75 a play, which was unheard of...I think the last time it was renewed in the market it went for about \$2,000." The programming business, says Ray, became like a game, one with clear-cut goals to achieve. "There was a lot of information available on what others were doing to reach a successful level, and I'm a great copier."

In 1976, Ray went to WRAL-TV Raleigh, N.C., again as program director. "I took a step down in title, but went to a station that was three times larger," he says. In the ratings book prior to Ray's arrival, WRAL-TV lost every time slot in the 4-8 p.m. period. In the book after Ray arrived, the station won them all.

Ray came full circle by returning to WCCB-TV in 1978. "WCCB-TV had lost its ABC affiliation and the challenge of programming for 24 hours appealed to me." In the first rating book after his arrival, says Ray, WCCB-TV was the second-ranked independent in the country. It was after his return to WCCB-TV that Ray got the idea for Raycom.

The owner of the station, Cy Bahakel, had purchased a satellite downlink and Ray started scanning the skies for programming. There wasn't much available at the time, but Ray found a college basketball tournament being held in Alaska. "It wasn't going to be

televised, so I checked around to see what I would have to do to get it beamed back to North Carolina," he says. Ray went to Alaska, built a control room and assembled a crew, using locals for many of the technical positions. Ray christened the tournament the Great Alaskan Shootout and the station sent the feed to markets that had colleges participating. "We ended up televising about 12 games that year," Ray said.

After purchasing the rights to the tournament from the station's owner in 1979, Ray formed Raycom as a sideline to his job at WCCB-TV. "It [Raycom] became so good that I just quit the job," he says.

At the time he founded Raycom, Ray hired Dee Birke to handle the sales end of the business. "She was recommended to me as a person who could sell anything," he said. "The deal that I made with Dee was that she would get 10% commission on her sales." At the end of Raycom's first year, Rick and Dee were married. "Because of the [10% commission] deal, she now figures that I owe her about \$20 million. She won't let me forget about that."

During that first year, Raycom operated out of Ray's apartment and closed out the year with \$16 in cash. The company did, however, have over \$200,000 in receivables. "We sweated it out waiting to see some of that money," Ray said.

At the end of the year, he and Dee sat down and charted goals for the next three years. One of those was to be the syndicator for Atlantic Coast Conference basketball, a prime commodity in the Southeast. Within three years, according to plan, Raycom was the carrier for the ACC, after failing in its bid the previous year. "Looking back now, I doubt that we were ready to handle something of that magnitude after our second year; I think it worked out just fine.

In the following year, Raycom added the Southwest Conference basketball and football schedules to his lineup. Along the way, Raycom also added college football's annual Kick-off Classic, held in the fall.

Raycom's goal now is to reach 80% of the country with sports and entertainment programming as part of its long-range goal of being the nation's largest regional network. Last year, Raycom began syndicating a four-part feature package that Ray describes as a "package of movie genre specials." Originally, the package was scheduled on a quarterly basis, but Ray says the special has been so well received that it will air monthly later this year and weekly starting next year. Raycom's first entertainment product was a tour of Elvis Presley's home hosted by Priscilla Presley. The show got a 7.2 national rating and was carried by 110 network affiliates.

What about a personal long-range goal for Rick Ray? "Some time in the future," he says after a moment's hesitation, "I would like to have the word 'philanthropist' listed for 'occupation' on my tax return." ■