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Sunshine State of Mind

WGN-TV weathercaster
Paul Konrad (THE ’87)

By Kelsey Schagemann
Photos by Tom Evans
On the front porch of a house in Montgomery, Ala., a mother grieves. Her sobs carry across the yard, where police and paramedics stand around a sheet-covered figure prone on the ground. A man with a camera slung around his neck approaches the media liaison for the police department. They talk; the man takes notes. Gunshot victim. Sixteen years of age. Then he steps away.

“Did you get the mother?”

“No, I didn’t,” he acknowledges. “She’s really torn up.”

“I just saw her on Channel 12,” the voice on the other end responds. “So you need to get the interview.”

The distraught mother in Montgomery shook him to his core. That very night, Konrad met up with his best friend from the TV station to talk about the experience. His friend happened to be a weathercaster; he not only was sympathetic to Konrad’s plight but also correctly forecasted Konrad’s next move. A simple question—“You ever think about getting into weather?”—changed Konrad’s life.

For more than two decades now, Konrad has been the voice and face of morning weather on WGN-TV. A quip from Ralph Kiner, the late baseball announcer, sums up this challenge rather well: “You know what they say about Chicago. If you don’t like the weather, wait 15 minutes.” Impending snowstorms, heat advisories, torrential downpours, record highs and lows—Konrad has reported on all of it. Regular viewers who tune in between 6 and 10 a.m. each weekday know they can expect Konrad’s sonorous, booming voice and a rapid-fire, perfectly enunciated delivery that relays the forecast in five or 15 seconds: “Rain likely this afternoon, things begin to improve here for Thursday, we’ll see some sunshine, we’ll see a daytime high of 60, things will warm up as we move toward the weekend, temperatures will climb back into the mid to upper 60s. That’s the forecast.”

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Even Konrad’s longer weather segments of three or four minutes follow a similar auditory rhythm. Efficiency is key. By the time Konrad whips through his final monologue of the day, he’s delivered roughly the same forecast 24 times already. “I’m like a bicycle messenger who knows where to go,” he offers by way of comparison.

Konrad’s natural ease in front of the camera stretches back farther than WGN, farther than Alabama, farther than his graduate degree in radio, television and film from Northwestern University and his theatre degree from DePaul. It goes all the way back to a little something called the Konrad Family Singers.

At age three, Konrad, bundled into lederhosen, made his performance debut in a scene reminiscent of the gaily singing von Trapp family from “The Sound of Music.” Like the von Trapps, Konrad’s grandfather hailed from Austria, and he passed down folk tunes of that country to his son, who taught them to his seven children and formed a band.

“It grew into a big thing,” Konrad says a bit sheepishly. The Konrad Family Singers traveled throughout the Midwest performing at summer festivals, Oktoberfests and churches. They were booking 75–100 events annually. “When I look at what my parents did, there’s a part of me that’s stunned they were able to get all of us into the car wearing the same clothes,” Konrad laughs. “But they were proud of our family, and this side business helped us make ends meet.”

Whether playing the concertina, shaking the tambourine or chiming the triangle, Konrad quickly grew comfortable onstage. “If you stood in front of people wearing lederhosen as long as I did, you could stand in front of the cameras and do the weather, too,” he says with a chuckle. Konrad appreciates the relationships he developed with his three brothers and three sisters during those years, and he’s certainly grateful for the opportunities the extra income afforded, but there did come a point when he wanted to call it quits.

“I was a freshman at DePaul, and my dad said we had a gig at the Drake Hotel,” Konrad remembers. His brothers had already declined to participate, so Konrad reluctantly agreed to perform. The costume went on, and he joined his parents and sisters to sing for the high-tea audience. “And there in the crowd is Sharon Stone,” Konrad says, “I felt like the biggest idiot on the planet!”

Though he retired that role, he picked up other jobs that were arguably worse. For three consecutive years, he was the “business end” of a reindeer for Breakfast with Santa events at Carson’s State Street store. It wasn’t exactly a plum role for someone enrolled at The Theatre School, but then again, those odd jobs, plus loans and internships, put him through college. “In my family, you were on your own at 18,” he remembers. “When I got accepted to DePaul, it was such a big deal.”

He suspects his father didn’t always understand this decision. “I’m taking tap dancing, sword fighting—all this random stuff,” Konrad laughs. “But those years were really important for me.” After growing up in a full house in the Chicago suburb of Naperville, Konrad was eager to strike out on his own in the city. He lived in Wrigleyville “before it was a desirable area” and rode his bike to class every day. In short order, Konrad found that DePaul’s work ethic matched his own values. “DePaul is a very salt-of-the-earth university,” he says. “It’s not a flaky place.”

Through the acting program, Konrad gained formative skills in performance, which proved helpful while he was studying television news during graduate school at Northwestern. Soon thereafter, he ended up at the station in Alabama where his friend asked that fateful question about weathercasting.

This friend gave Konrad a crash course in the art and science of forecasting the weather, and Konrad also enrolled in meteorology classes at Auburn and Mississippi State universities. When a weekend weathercaster position opened up at the station, Konrad was hired.

“It was the perfect opportunity,” Konrad says, “and I was painfully bad.” He couldn’t control his breathing. He didn’t know when to swallow. He felt like he might pass out—maybe because he wasn’t taking in enough air. “People from rural Alabama were calling, saying, ‘This Yankee sucks, send him back North,’” Konrad remembers. He jokes about it now, but it wasn’t funny at the time. If you can’t talk in a clear and steady manner while also conveying a great deal of information in a brief amount of time, weathercasting might not be in your future. On the other hand, Konrad is grateful that he made those mistakes in front of a relatively small audience.

Konrad was eventually promoted to chief weathercaster at the station, but he wanted to return to the Midwest. In 1992, he accepted a position with newly launched CLTV, a 24-hour news channel in Chicago. “I was doing around 27 weather hits each morning,” Konrad says. “So I wound up getting about five years of experience in one year.” From there, Konrad went to Tampa, Fla., for two years to try out a different market. His dad’s illness drew Konrad home again in August 1996. At that point, the WGN morning show was only a few years old and still in a bit of an experimental phase. “When I think about those early episodes, I honestly wonder if anyone was watching,” Konrad says, noting that the ratings weren’t great. “But the station stuck with the show and gave it time to grow as we figured out what worked.”

Twenty-two years later, there’s no doubt that people are watching. WGN Morning News consistently ranks in the top spot in terms of viewers, especially those ages 25–54, who have made it the No. 1 spot in the 6–9 a.m. time block for the past six years—no small feat in the country’s third-largest market. WGN Morning News has been called “highly entertaining,”
“the most creative and engaging television news program in Chicago” and “the highest-rated morning show that nobody #@king likes.”

That latter comment, which came from the show’s own 2014 promo, crystallizes much of the show’s appeal. The morning news team has no problem making fun of themselves on a daily, hourly and, sometimes, minute-by-minute basis. “It’s hard enough to wake up in the morning and hear more bad news,” Konrad muses. “When we have the opportunity to have some fun and make people smile, we seize it.”

The three stooges of the show are Konrad and co-anchors Robin Baumgarten and Larry Potash. After so many years working together, their chemistry is electric. “Our onscreen relationships are authentic,” Konrad explains. “They’re these special relationships that probably aren’t unique in and of themselves, but what is unique is that they play out live in front of people and they’ve been going on for as long as they have.”

Konrad frequently joins Baumgarten and Potash at the anchor desk to riff on everything from baseball names of yore (“Cannonball Titcomb, Stubby Clapp”) to roller-coaster loops (“the enema maneuver”) to Konrad’s ubiquitous bottles of water (“maybe it’s not water in there”). The anchors are often reduced to tears of laughter; after a particularly hilarious moment, they sometimes struggle to read the teleprompter without collapsing into giggles. Above all else, it’s genuine.

An on-air mistake in 2010 underscores this point. The team was covering the planned destruction of an old bridge southwest of Joliet, Ill. “This is live TV, Larry,” Baumgarten says in a voiceover of the still-standing bridge. “This could be exciting. I don’t think we’ve ever had a live implosion on our show.”

The anchors continue to chitchat over the image for five minutes before cutting to Konrad, who says, “While we’re stalling, go ahead and show them the picture, but today as we get going, we’re having temperatures in the 30s—” Suddenly, the live feed is back, and of course, the remains of the bridge are already in the water. All three anchors scream, “Are you kidding me?”

“[It’s] another metaphor for our show, another crash and burn,” Baumgarten says, still in shock. “We stay live for three minutes and we cut away for five seconds and it happens.”

“I did look pretty good in that shot, though, if I may say so,” Konrad jokes.

Looking back on it now, Konrad says it’s a prime example of how the team never takes themselves too seriously. “Yes, we screwed that up,” he admits. “But I think people appreciate that we’re willing to say, ‘Look, people make mistakes; we make mistakes, too.’”

“We’ve kinda specialized in having things go wrong and just staying with it and forging ahead,” he continues. “To me, those raw, unplanned moments are as interesting as anything else out there.”

All that said, Konrad doesn’t mess around when it comes to the weather forecast. “In this market, especially, you really have to respect and honor the weather,” he notes. “People are depending on us to provide accurate information.”

Konrad’s day begins around 3:15 a.m. He spends some time at home looking at the weather reports before continuing the process at work, discussing each model with his producer, analyzing the models and making changes to the graphics. Since the station doesn’t have windows in the studio or offices, Konrad also likes to poke his head outside at least once during the show to confirm his local forecast still looks accurate.

It’s easy to malign the weathercaster, of course. “I think people in Chicago believe we’re wrong 75 percent of the time—and yet we still get paid,” Konrad says. Konrad’s forecasting average is far better than that, and it truly pains him when the weather doesn’t turn out as he predicted. The reality is that while the technological models have vastly improved during his time as a weathercaster, there’s still a great deal of human analysis involved.

He points to one model that indicates rain beginning at 3 p.m. Another model predicts rain starting around 11 a.m. the next day. A third shows the bulk of the rain hitting Chicago the next day but not until the afternoon. “I can flip through five or six different models, and they’ll all show different things,” Konrad explains. “I might look at 10 or 11 of them to figure out which one has been the most reliable lately.”

Forecasting a high of 70 degrees when the high turns out to be 73 doesn’t typically bother people. But if a weathercaster predicts 5 inches of snow and only half an inch arrives, people get angry. “Chicago residents have this unique relationship with snowstorms where we kinda want them, but after a while, we don’t want them anymore,” Konrad muses. “There’s a lot of anticipation, especially around that first snow, and with that comes stress for me because I don’t want to screw it up.”

The reality is that it’s impossible to be accurate 100 percent of the time. With complex weather systems, a wind shift of only five miles can make a huge difference in a weathercaster’s accuracy. Still, Konrad knows he provides a valuable service, despite the

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proliferation of weather apps and radar data now available on cellphones. “At some point, you need a human to get more involved,” he says. “Maybe that’s only 20 to 30 percent of the time, but that still makes us relevant.”

Technological changes have affected Konrad’s career in other ways as well. He is very active on social media, often posting several times an hour on Facebook and Twitter. On a normal week, he reaches 5 million people through his social media presence. The station encourages this proliferation of content by disseminating a daily report containing each anchor’s social media score. Konrad is almost always in the top five for audience engagement. “My goal is to score well every day,” he says. “One of the best parts about this job is that I could be home with them when they were little.” Now all four children are in school during the day, but Konrad still appreciates the flexibility of his schedule. He can help with homework, watch their athletic games and attend their events. “I feel like I get more hours out of the day since I start so early,” he explains. “It’s not lost on me what a privilege that is.”

The second half of his day begins around 11 a.m. and lasts until 10:30 p.m. With the children at school, he can spend time with his wife, Kirsten, a former WGN-TV producer Konrad met at the station. “It’s helpful because she understands the complexities of my work, and she also helps me be more respectful of the challenges producers face,” Konrad notes. She also knows firsthand how draining it can be to start your day at 3 a.m. Konrad’s manic energy on set is sometimes a cover. “Even if you try to take a nap in the middle of the day, you’re physically exhausted all the time,” he says.

Nonetheless, he rallies the energy to become Coach Konrad in the evening hours. Three of his children play baseball, and he coaches all three of their teams. “We have over 100 games between April 15 and July 31,” he says. “So I’m definitely personally attuned to how weather impacts people’s lives.” It’s a bit of a joke now—when the other parents see Konrad start to pack up his gear, they know the threat of rain is real.

Konrad has won nine Chicago/Midwest Emmy Awards during his tenure on WGN-TV, but to his kids, he’s just Dad. “They keep me humble,” he says. “My son just texted me: ‘Can you please wash my cleats today? Have Mom bring them when she comes to school.’” He shakes his head, laughing. “My title in our house is Chief Cleats Cleaner. They couldn’t care less that I’m on TV.”

After all, their dad has been forecasting the weather, ribbing his co-workers and pulling stunts on air for as long as they can remember. Konrad, however, can’t always believe it. “When I showed up, I was thinking I’ll try to sign a two-year deal,” he says. “It’s so bizarre to me to think I’ve been on this job for 22 years; it wound up truly matching who I am.”

Follow Paul Konrad on Twitter @PaulKonrad, on Facebook @WGNpaulkonrad and on Instagram @wgnkonrad.