

Jack Gravely finds his voice again



Jack Gravely, former head of the Virginia NAACP, former talk-show host on WRVA, contemplates a question as he works his job as current talk-show host on WLEE.

Photo by Bob Brown / Times-Dispatch

By [BILL LOHMANN](#)

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One of Jack W. Gravely's favorite new lunch spots is Ambiance Bar & Grill, a stylish little eatery in the heart of Richmond's Jackson Ward.

But he knows the place from another time in his life when it had another name and another look - and he can almost taste the salmon cakes, eggs, fried apples and biscuits from the old days.

"This was one of the spots," said Gravely, recalling not just the good food but the images of local leaders hunched over cups of coffee discussing issues and strategies. "You could come in and run into anybody of any renown in the black community."

Gravely had some of that renown. The executive secretary of the Virginia NAACP in the 1970s and 1980s, Gravely was a familiar voice on civil-rights matters, rarely avoiding the opportunity to share an opinion or offer a quip. Those days are gone, but Gravely's voice is back on a daily talk show on WLEE-AM (990).

He's happy to engage in discussions on just about anything -- his catch-phrase: "If you live it, we will talk it" -- but he wants to make one thing clear.

"I've never felt comfortable with, 'Oh, you're the black talk-show host,'" he said over lunch in the window seat at Ambiance. "I'm a talk-show host who happens to be black."

Not that Gravely is opposed to pointing out the rich background he brings to the airwaves.

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Gravely, 65, was the seventh of 12 children and grew up in Pocahontas, a coal town in Tazewell County. His mother was a domestic worker; his father, a coal miner, was killed in a mine explosion in 1957.

"After my father died, my mother said none of her sons would ever work in the coal mines, and none of us did," Gravely said.

As a kid, Gravely shined shoes, ran moonshine for gamblers and went to church every Sunday.

He also listened to the radio, as a source of entertainment, cultural pride and, as it turned out, inspiration for future employment.

"I remember my mother making all of us sit down and listen to Sugar Ray Robinson's fights or Jackie Robinson at bat," Gravely recalled. "On Sunday mornings, old-time Bible hours would come on, and we used to listen to those before we went to Sunday school.

"I always loved radio. I guess deep down, I had this, 'I'd like to do that.'"

Gravely went on to what is now Fayetteville State University where he played football and marched against segregated seating in movie theaters and restaurants in Fayetteville and Raleigh. He served in Vietnam in a combat support unit, and graduated from University of Virginia School of Law in 1972.

He came to Richmond to work for the Neighborhood Legal Aid Society and taught at Virginia Union University before he was having lunch one day with friends and heard someone mention that W. Lester Banks, then executive secretary of the state NAACP, was retiring. Gravely applied for the job in 1976 and got it.

He found himself in hot water after he told a reporter he had taken over "a house completely gutted by fire." He didn't mean it as a slap at Banks, a leader in the civil-rights movement, but it came across that way to some. It wasn't the last time Gravely's outspoken manner generated turmoil. He aimed to make the NAACP more visible and more political, though not necessarily in a partisan way, and it rubbed some people in the organization the wrong way, said Michael G. Brown, Gravely's deputy at the time.

"Jack is committed to a philosophy of change," said Brown, now a political consultant who also served as secretary of the State Board of Elections. "He can at times be relentless in the pursuit of what he's going after."

Under Gravely's leadership, the NAACP conducted voter-registration drives, led the call for single-member districts in the General Assembly and developed surveys to determine the extent of minority representation in cities, towns and counties across the state. He still speaks in awe of the opportunity he had to get to know -- and learn from -- civil-rights pioneers such as Oliver W. Hill Sr. and Samuel W. Tucker.

However, the rift with the board never closed, and he resigned from the state NAACP in 1984.

By then, he was already working radio.

Driving down Broad Street, he was listening to WRVA when he heard the Rev. Jerry Falwell make a comment about blacks -- he no longer recalls exactly what it was -- that he vehemently disagreed with. He turned his car around, drove to the station on Church Hill and went in to ask how he could respond to Falwell.

"First time I ever met John Harding," Gravely said of the longtime WRVA news director and operations manager whom he credits with serving as his earliest radio mentor. "He told me to write it out, bring it to him to look at, and then he'd put me in a booth to record it."

He did and later heard himself on the radio.

"I'll be honest with you," Gravely said. "I got a charge out of that."

Harding said he'd been searching for someone to provide a voice for the black community when Gravely came along.

"He was exactly what I was looking for," Harding, now retired, said in an e-mail from his farm in North Carolina. "Raw talent willing to take a little direction. Jack was one of the few lawyers I've ever known who could write something without becoming completely paralyzed in legal psycho-babble. The man could flat communicate."

Gravely did twice-weekly commentaries for WRVA for several years during the 1980s. Harding likened an opinion piece from Gravely to "a can opener." Later, Gravely had his own program, a three-hour talk show on Saturday nights, from 1996 to 2001, when new management cleared out much of the station's local talent, including him.

Funny thing, while Gravely was doing the Saturday night show he wasn't living full time in Richmond. He'd moved north to work first in Arlington County as a special assistant to the county manager, then at National Public Radio as special assistant to the president for affirmative action, then to Baltimore to work at the NAACP national headquarters. He also returned to the Virginia NAACP to serve for a time as president of its board.

Most recently, he was director of diversity for the Federal Communications Commission, a position he held for 13 years and retired from last year. He launched his WLEE talk show in October.

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Gravely, a rare local talk-show host in an increasingly syndicated world, likes the fact -- no, he loves it -- that many of his callers don't agree with him.

"Talk radio is a tremendously engaging medium," he said. "You can take people where they don't want to go if you know how to do it. The greatest compliment a guy like me gets is someone who says, 'I don't agree with a damn thing you say, but I'm going to listen tomorrow.'"

Jim Jacobs, general manager of Davidson Media Group, Richmond, which includes WLEE, knew Gravely from his days at WRVA. Jacobs used to host the afternoon drive-time program.

"He has very strong and well-reasoned opinions," said Jacobs. "He is neither a conservative or liberal puppet. He has his own feelings and he will tell you how he feels, not how he thinks you should feel.

"With all of the things he has going for him as a broadcaster, he really is a very nice fellow."

Gravely prepares for his show by reading newspapers, books and academic reports. He spends several hours each afternoon on the Internet, researching topics for upcoming programs. He routinely shows up at the studio each morning with eight to 12 issues to throw out to listeners.

"If they bite, fine," he said. "If they don't, I'll go with the flow."

Brown, Gravely's friend and former colleague, said one of Gravely's best traits -- particularly for someone who enjoys talking -- is that he listens well.

Gravely lives in Petersburg with his wife, Barbara. He has three grown daughters from his first marriage and a son from a relationship in college.

He and Barbara, a retired teacher, have been married 14 years. They like to travel and to garden. He finds great satisfaction tending his vegetable garden. He's looking forward to fresh collard greens at Thanksgiving.

He also finds great satisfaction in being part of the daily conversation in Richmond again. Enjoying a burger and his usual ginger ale at another of his new favorite spots -- Leigh Street Bar & Grille -- Gravely said he wants his show to be syndicated around the country. But he doesn't want to go anywhere.

"I want to do a talk show from down South," he said. "I don't want to be up North. I want to stay here. I have no desire to go to Washington or New York. I don't want to commute. I've run the roads for 30 or 35 years.

"If it comes down to that, I'll just go over to Virginia State University and teach a couple of classes, live in Petersburg and raise my tomatoes."

SLIDESHOW

http://static.mgnetwork.com/rtd/slideshows/20090726_sjack/index.html - Jack's back. Jack Gravely, former head of the Virginia NAACP, returns to Richmond to host a talk show on WLEE.

MORE

•• [Jack Gravely quick hits:](#)

Jack Gravely on:

Current black leadership in the community compared to that leadership in the past:

"I think the difference now is foundation and roots. The people I worked with in the '70s and '80s in Virginia had solid foundations and deep roots in the community. They grew up here, went to school here, or they moved here at a very early age.

"The second thing is you're seeing the ascendancy of a younger, very well-educated group of young leaders coming up in the city of Richmond. I'm very impressed with the young group, but I don't think they know the community and the issues like the old guys did."

Richmond's future:

"Richmond needs to stop talking about the future and walk into it. We talk too much about the future in Richmond. Richmond lives too much in its past, and is haunted too much by what Richmond used to be or what Richmond used to do. Richmond is afraid to put its hands on the plow and go forward.

"Richmond could be a wonderful city. We've got a lot of good people here, black and white, a lot of natural resources, a good location."

Talk radio:

"I can talk beyond race, but I can talk about Iran, Russia, mountaintop mining, religion or Paul on the road to Damascus. I have a phrase, 'Running that rabbit.' It means, we're going to discuss it. Let's run that rabbit.

"There must be a genuine respect for the people you're talking to. I think that respect goes a long way in showing them I'm really interested in what they're talking about. I try to give them an edgy, entertaining and educational [show]. At the end of the day, I don't need to be walking away talking about your mother, and you don't need to be walking away talking about my mother even though we don't agree."

WANT TO LISTEN?

Jack Gravely is on the air Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to noon on WLEE-AM (990). You also can listen to the show and find out more at jackgravelyshow.com.

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