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Community media makes big difference in small town

By Mark Pattison Catholic News Service

POSTVILLE, Iowa (CNS) -- If you want to see the impact of low-power media, look no further than radio station KPVL-FM in Postville.

Postville has been an ethnically and religiously diverse community, given that about 2,500 people live in the town. There are Catholics, Protestants and Jews. There are Russians, Mexicans, Bosnians, Guatemalans and other, smaller identifiable populations.

But until KPVL came on the scene, about the only radio station that could be picked up was a country station in Decorah, nearly 30 miles away.

The Lutheran church in Postville first took up the cause of community radio, and gave each of the ethnic groups a turn at the microphone. But it turned out to be hard work -- too hard for some -- and the board of directors eventually gave the station manager job to Jeff Abbas, an Iowa native who returned home trying to figure out the next step in a career that included stints as a disc jockey for classics-formatted public radio stations in California and a smooth-jazz station under the moniker "Les Stress."

Abbas gave KPVL an "Americana" format, a largely acoustic amalgam of country, folk and bluegrass. But he's got his 18,000-tune music library separated into 26 genres, subdivided up to five times within each genre.

He mastered a "digital program director" computer program that shuffles the tunes and chooses 246 Americana songs to play each day (smooth jazz, new age and a syndicated music education show fills eight hours a day). He then learned how to record his DJ "drop-ins" for up to seven days in advance so he -- or anybody -- won't have to be a slave to the microphone 16 hours a day, seven days a week. He can still cut in live whenever he needs to.

That happened last May after the federal immigration raid on the Agriprocessors meatpacking plant in Postville. Abbas spent untold hours in the station, located in the town's Multicultural Center building, in the days following the raid, letting residents know what the latest was with the situation.

"I had never done news before," Abbas said April 21, recalling the chaotic time.

When Agriprocessors abruptly closed its plant Nov. 14, Abbas used the Multicultural Center as a community service center, making plea after plea for food as a steady stream of employees thrown out of work filled the building over the next two weeks seeking help.

He also recorded an interview with one man who said he had heard on the street that some of the now-desperate jobless were going to rob stores, banks and merchants on their way to deposit the day's proceeds at the bank. The interview subject also told of plans being hatched

by some of the jobless to kidnap the children of a top Agriprocessors official in an effort to get the last paycheck they never received.

The interview never aired, although some complained to the Federal Communications Commission after having claimed to hear the "inciting" interview. Abbas let Postville police hear the interview; he said police had already heard the threat.

It costs about \$3,800 each month to run KPVL. It gets barely one-third that in contributions. For a time, Abbas, who had forgone his pay to make ends meet at the station, was in danger of losing his house and his car. Friends stepped in to help him out, and "I'm in a much better place" due to the aid.

Abbas said he sometimes wonders whether anyone is listening to KPVL. Once he offered a free CD to anyone listening. No callers. Abbas upped the offer to two CDs, then three, then six, then 12. No callers. However, after he mispronounced the hometown of a woman in the local obituary section of one newscast, "I got six calls telling me I said it wrong," he said.

The moral of the story: Not everyone can be a broadcast titan -- or has to be. With enough seed money, imagination and dedication, low-power TV, like its low-power radio counterparts, can make an effective difference in the communities they serve.

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Pattison is media editor for Catholic News Service.

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When you keep your eye on TV, what do you see? What are your likes or dislikes? What are your concerns and criticisms? Be as general or as specific as you wish. Send your comments to: Mark Pattison, Media Editor, Catholic News Service, 3211 Fourth St. NE, Washington, DC 20017.

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