

Paul Sullivan, popular WBZ radio talk show host, dies at 50

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By Clea Simon, Globe Correspondent | September 10, 2007

Radio host Paul Sullivan, who drew an average of 200,000 listeners a night to freewheeling discussions of politics and pop culture, died Sunday after a three-year fight with brain cancer. He was 50.

Mr. Sullivan's 8 p.m.-to-midnight show on WBZ-AM consistently placed among the three top-rated programs in its time slot. It capped a career that took the Lowell native from cable access to print journalism to fame on the airwaves, where he was the hand-picked successor to legendary evening talk-radio host David Brudnoy.

In fact, Mr. Sullivan was among the callers to Brudnoy's final show in 2004, joining dozens of fans and colleagues for an evening of moving and memorable radio. At the time he was already dealing with the cancer that would take his own life. He had been diagnosed with Stage IV melanoma in November, 2004, and was recovering from his first surgery to remove cancerous tumors.

Still, Mr. Sullivan told the Boston Globe at the time that he felt "terrific."

"I'm gaining my strength back," he said. "Honest to God, this doesn't feel like the worst thing that's happened to me. If I thought whining and crying about this would help, count me in."

"His handling of his illness was a classic insight into the man," said WBZ TV and radio political analyst Jon Keller. "He refused to make a spectacle of it and downplayed it with self-effacing humor."

On air, Mr. Sullivan had an unassuming manner. With his hard-edged local accent recognizable to locals as the sound of the Merrimack Valley, Mr. Sullivan, or "Sully," came across as a likeable everyman, and quite unlike Brudnoy, his predecessor.

"In many ways, they couldn't be more different," said Keller. "David was extraordinarily erudite. Paul is more of a lunch-counter Lowell Spinners type of guy. What they had in common is a love for this area, an appreciation for what it means to be a New Englander, and a sense of basic fairness."

To some radio observers, those differences set Mr. Sullivan's program above the rest. "What made that show work is that you tuned in and you knew immediately that you were listening to a voice from New England," said Scott Fybush, editor of the website North East Radio Watch. "He was just a great guy, and he never forgot his roots."

On his weeknight show, Mr. Sullivan tackled everything from politics to bigotry with down-to-earth common sense. "If you don't want to listen up, hang up," he told a caller on April 13 who was defending talk host Don Imus. Speaking of local drivers, years earlier, he famously commented that "bad drivers are like bad breath. Nobody really thinks of themselves as one of them."

In between charming callers and interviewing politicians, he would also undergo chemotherapy and radiation treatment and three more surgeries, including a five-hour operation to remove tumors from his brain at Massachusetts General Hospital on May 4.

Mr. Sullivan's last broadcast was on June 28. Guests included Mayor Thomas Menino and Senators Edward M. Kennedy and John F. Kerry.

"When you talk about people on the air on talk programs, a lot of us like to babble, but you knew the issues, and that's so important," Menino said. "That's why, when you called, we always came. We believe you, we trust you, and your integrity is second to none."

Mr. Sullivan, a married father of five, worked his way up to the top-rated CBS news and talk station. Throughout the 1980s, he served as a Tewksbury selectman, as had his father and grandfather. His media debut was on a local cable access program, "Tewksbury Spotlight," and he came to radio through WLLH-AM (1400) in Lowell and Lawrence, where he hosted the morning show from 1989 to 1998. (The station now broadcasts as ESPN Boston.) He also did fill-in work at WRKO-AM (680).

As a newspaperman, Mr. Sullivan served as the political editor of the Lowell Sun, and began writing a column for the paper in 1991. In the '90s, he joined the now-defunct WCVB-TV program, "Five on Five." Brudnoy noticed him on this panel show, and invited him to guest host on the radio in 1996.

In 1999, when Brudnoy cut his program by two hours, Mr. Sullivan took over the 10 p.m. to midnight shift. After Brudnoy's death, "The Paul Sullivan Show" ran for four hours a night.

A graduate of University of Massachusetts, Lowell, with a bachelor's in political science, Mr. Sullivan also received a master's in communications management from Simmons College and served as an adjunct professor of journalism and communications at Middlesex Community College.

In a Lowell Sun column published in December 2004, Mr. Sullivan wrote about how "lucky" he was to be surrounded by such a strong support system at the time his cancer was discovered.

"Even as Paul progressed up the ladder to what I would say is arguably the plum radio gig in the city, if not the country," said WBZ's Keller, "he always maintained a real down-to-earth personality, a razor-sharp sense of humor, and a sense of basic decency."

Sullivan is survived by his wife of a decade, Mary Jo Griffin, and five children, Ryan, Ashley and Kerri Sullivan, and Caitlin and Colleen Ferry.

Arrangements are pending.

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