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Nellie Knorr, Bloomfield Hills

Radio station owner brought British Invasion to Metro airwaves

Mark Hicks / The Detroit News

When music fans' tastes fluxed in the cultural tide of the early 1960s, many radio stations revamped their formats to be better attuned -- and Nellie Marie Knorr ensured that Metro Detroit was on a similar frequency.

As president of Knorr Broadcasting Corp. in Detroit, the widow oversaw the transformation of the group's flagship station, then known as WKHM.

Mrs. Knorr hired a consultant to check "the pulse of Detroit," said her daughter, Nancy Polk. Convinced the British Invasion was the future of the airwaves, she switched the AM station's format to top 40 and its call letters to WKNR.

Within weeks, the Dearborn-based station became "the hottest thing" on the air, blared by hipsters and newcomers alike, said Mrs. Knorr's son, Fred. "Everybody was rocking out to WKNR. It was such a phenomenon. Mom was caught up in the excitement."

Mrs. Knorr died Thursday, Aug. 10, 2006, at St. Joseph Mercy Hospital in Pontiac following a fall. She was 89.

Born Aug. 14, 1916, in Indianapolis, Mrs. Knorr studied education at Hillsdale College. She graduated in 1938.

She taught English to high school students in Imlay City for two years before marrying her husband, Frederick A. Knorr II, who founded Knorr Broadcasting Corp. in 1946.

When Mr. Knorr died in 1960, his wife was named the corporation's president, assuming ownership of five radio stations and a one-third interest in the Detroit Tigers.

Though it had a limited signal, WKNR -- or Keener, as it came to be known -- soon became the radio station du jour, regularly earning top ratings, compiling popular record guides and sponsoring appearances by such acts as the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and Herman's Hermits.

Amid the hoopla, Mrs. Knorr implored her

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Mrs. Knorr [See full image](#)

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employees: "I hope that all of you keep your heads about you."

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"She was sort of the leveling influence," said Russ Gibb, a former WKNR disc jockey.

"We were a top station, talked about all over the U.S., and yet she was the one that kept reminding us that we were just young people doing what we loved to do."

Before selling her share of the station in the late 1960s, Mrs. Knorr branched into the state's television market, overseeing cable installation in Jackson.

Her work with Knorr Corp. earned her an Alfred P. Sloan award in 1962.

In 1964, the local chapter of the Women's Advertising Club named her Woman of the Year.

A board member at Hillsdale College for more than 20 years, Mrs. Knorr also served on the board at Oakwood Hospital in Dearborn.

She retired in 1970, dividing her time between Bloomfield Hills and a condominium in Boca Raton, Fla.

Summers usually found her traveling with family, with whom she climbed the Great Wall of China; cruised the Bahamas; and, last June, visited the Great Barrier Reef in Australia.

Mrs. Knorr documented each journey with notes, photographs and souvenirs.

"She really had knowledge of a lot of places," Polk said. "It was the experience -- learning about cultures."

Besides her son and daughter, survivors include a daughter, Katie Mers; a brother, Dean Welch; four grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren.

Services will be at 3 p.m. Sept. 9 at Christ Church Cranbrook, 470 Church, Bloomfield Hills.

Memorials may be made to the Knorr Family Dining Room, Hillsdale College, 33 East College, Hillsdale, MI 49242.

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