

Vern Hawkins



Class of 1993

Silver Circle Profile
By: **Kevin Scott Wing**



From his modest beginnings while growing up in the Midwest, **Vern Hawkins** would eventually go on to become a well-respected television news reporter on the West Coast, interviewing seven U.S. Presidents, covering just about every local, national and international story imaginable – big and small – and finally, making an indelible mark as “a reporter’s reporter” here in the Bay Area.

In many cases, Hawkins’ colleagues would call him the consummate professional. Even photographers he worked with in the field would call him “a photographer’s reporter.” As some have said over the years, Hawkins would always have their backs. And, he always treated them and his profession with the utmost respect.

Hawkins, who was inducted into the *Silver Circle* of the San Francisco/Northern California Chapter of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences in 1993, is perhaps best known for his 26 years as a reporter at KTVU in Oakland. He also spent many years as a reporter and anchor at KCRA in Sacramento.

For Hawkins, broadcasting was in his blood from almost the very beginning. Born in Kansas City, Kansas, in 1933, his parents, **Vic** and **Genevieve Hawkins**, eventually relocated to Wichita, Kansas. It is there that the broadcasting bug bit Hawkins, even before he became a teenager.

His father was a staff announcer and band leader at KFH radio in Wichita in the early 1940s. In addition to live band music and the occasional news broadcast, KFH also aired a program called *The Phantom Theater*.

“As a kid, I’d get some parts on that show,” Hawkins remembers. “There’d be maybe three or four lines per show, but it was a lot of fun. Since my dad worked there, I was exposed to it at a very early age.”

Hawkins says he spent a lot of time at the station.

“After school, I’d go there and hang out,” he says. “And, at night, I’d be there, taking it all in.”

When Hawkins’ father died in 1947, the family packed up and moved to southern California, settling down in Long Beach.

Hawkins attended Long Beach State College, where he studied broadcasting. But, he recalls that there wasn’t much to the broadcasting department. So, Hawkins decided to take a job at an FM radio station on Signal Hill, not far from Long Beach.

As the Korean War began, Hawkins found himself in the service, first spending 16 weeks at Fort Ord, near Monterey. Then, he was on a ship bound for Korea, where he spent four months. Eventually, he was transferred to Japan. There, he learned of the Far East Radio Network, which was also known as the Armed Forces Radio Network. The year was 1954.

Hawkins wanted to be on air, so he auditioned for an Army captain by the name of **George Kennedy**, who later won an Oscar® for best supporting actor in *Cool Hand Luke*.

“I auditioned for George, and I got the job,” Hawkins says. “I was very encouraged.”

Hawkins remained on the radio with the Far East Network, then returned to Los Angeles, where he earned a FCC first-class license.

Finally, he landed commercial radio jobs at KUTE-FM in Glendale and KBUC in Corona, in Riverside County. Hawkins later worked as a Top 40 deejay at KFIV in Modesto.

But, it was television that Hawkins was interested in. In 1960, he was hired at KVOA in Tucson as an anchor and staff announcer. He also worked at KCEE radio in town.

California came calling again, and Hawkins moved to the North Coast to be an anchor and reporter at KVIQ in Eureka. He was hired by **Fred Zehnder**, who, years later, would begin what would become a legendary 21-year career as news director at KTVU in Oakland.

“Of course, that’s where I met Fred,” Hawkins says. “We had a lot of fun working together in Eureka. The station was very small, and we did everything. I anchored the evening news there, and Fred would be working in the control room to put us on the air.”

Hawkins and Zehnder would later be reunited as

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colleagues at KTVU years later, but not before each went his separate way. In 1962, both left KVIQ – Hawkins was hired as a reporter and anchor at KCRA in Sacramento, and Zehnder went to KPIX in San Francisco to work as a photographer and assignment editor.

Hawkins remained at KCRA briefly, then went to work at KPIX in the fall of 1964. But, his stay at KPIX was short-lived. He would eventually rejoin KCRA. The station wanted to open up a Contra Costa County news bureau, and Hawkins jumped at the chance.

KCRA opened the first TV bureau, located in Concord in 1965, the same year Hawkins purchased a home in Walnut Creek.

“The bureau was located in what was then the *Concord Transcript* newspaper office,” Hawkins says. “I became the first broadcast president of the Contra Costa Press Club.”

Ultimately, the bureau would expand so that Hawkins could cover the entire nine-county Bay Area. He ran the bureau for 10 years, until KCRA followed a consultant’s suggestion that viewers in Sacramento wanted more local news, and cable TV had replaced rabbit ears.

Out of work, Hawkins was offered a summer-relief reporting job at KGO-TV in 1975, but instead went to KTVU, where news director **Sherm Bazell** hired him as assignment editor and reporter. Hawkins also worked under news director **Ted “Mad Dog” Kavanau**.

Hawkins covered many of the Bay Area’s major stories in the 1960s and 70s: People’s Park in Berkeley, the free speech rallies at the University of California, Berkeley, the kidnapping of **Patricia Hearst** and the attempted assassination of President **Gerald Ford**.

Hawkins was reunited with Zehnder when the latter joined KTVU as news director in 1978, moving over from KGO-TV, where he served briefly as assistant news director.

During the next two decades, Hawkins would cover just about every local story, and he covered many major ones, too, including the Loma Prieta

earthquake in 1989 and the Oakland Hills firestorm in 1991.

And, let’s not forget that Hawkins has interviewed seven U.S. Presidents, from **Lyndon Johnson** to **George Bush**.

Hawkins is proud of many of his stories, especially his series on the South Pacific, which was nominated for an Emmy® Award.

“Vern was, in my mind, the first reporter at KTVU to put together a complete package,” Zehnder recalls. “All of the other reporters had never done that, but Vern came from KCRA with that kind of experience. He brought an expertise to his stand-ups and his packages that other reporters eventually learned from.”

“You always knew when Vern went out on a story, that he was going to get the whole story, the complete story, on the air,” Zehnder says.

Zehnder, who retired from KTVU in 1999 and today publishes *The San Leandro Times* and *The Castro Valley Forum*, remembers Hawkins’ professionalism and class going back to their years working in Eureka.

“We had the most fun up there in Eureka. The two of us got the news on the air by ourselves every night,” Zehnder says.

He also speaks fondly of his longtime friend and colleague.

“Vern’s one of my best friends, and we go back a long way,” Zehnder says.

While working at KTVU, Hawkins had the opportunity to work with many experienced and skillful news photographers. One of them was **Rebecca Gerendasy**, who worked for the station for many years.

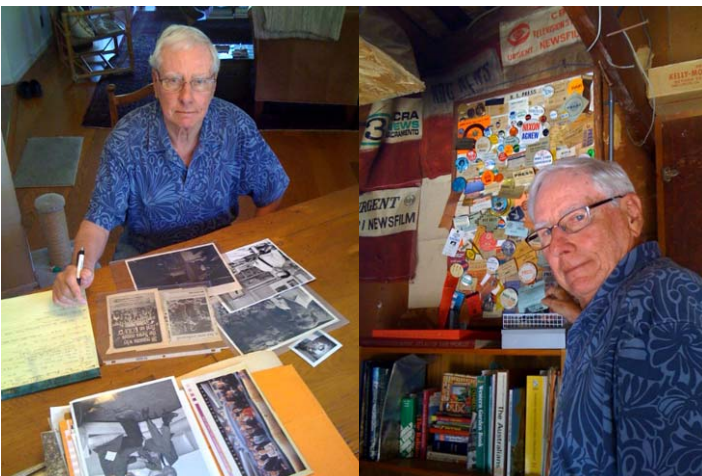
“Vern was very economical to work with,” Gerendasy says. “One 20-minute tape, a one-take standup and just enough questions asked for the story to be told.”

Gerendasy, now living in Oregon where, for the last several years, her production company has produced the popular *Cooking Up A Story* online documentary series, fondly remembers Hawkins for knowing where the best restaurants were located.

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Silver Circle Hawkins



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"All the camera folks knew when you worked with Vern, you were going to be eating well that day," she says. "Fast food restaurants, the norm for most news crews, were not in his repertoire. He always allowed us the right amount of time for a decent lunch."

In 1998, Hawkins retired from full-time reporting at KTVU, but remained at the station for three more years, working part-time. He also spent 15 years writing for *Journeys*, a travel magazine. He also wrote for *Fodor's Travel Guides*.

Today, Hawkins still calls Walnut Creek home, living in the same sprawling ranch-style house he purchased 45 years ago. He's also been with his companion, **Kathryn Toronto**, for the last 20 years. They spend a lot of time traveling, and the couple also has a residence in Sarasota, Florida.



(Kevin Wing pens the Silver Circle and Gold Circle profiles for Off Camera. He is a two-time Emmy® Award-winning Bay Area journalist, currently with KNTV/NBC Bay Area in San Jose as a freelance news writer/producer. Reach him at kevinscottwing@gmail.com.)

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ECO Co. gets EMA Nom.



Twenty-one nominations have been tapped for the 20th Environmental Media Awards, including feature film contenders *Avatar* and *Fantastic Mr. Fox* from Fox and *The Kids Are All Right* from Focus.

Eco Company, the educational news magazine show from Bay Area based Red Willow Films was given the nod in the Children's TV: Live Action category. Other nominations in that category went to Disney Channel's *Lights, Camera, Take Action!* and Nickelodeon's *Nick News with Linda Ellerbee*. San Francisco-based production company Red Willow Films produces *Eco Company* and Founder **Bob Anderson** is Executive Producer.

Eco Company is hosted by Bay Area teens **Adam Courtin**, **Jordan Fowler**, **Jessica Mann** and **Brendan Young** who report on the environment, ecology, climate change, alternative fuels, organics, sustainability, conservation, recycling, new developments and research in clean technology and much more. Each show also includes stories about teens who are taking action to ensure a sustainable planet in the years to come.

"The EMA nomination confirms that we are not only on the right track, but successfully creating awareness among teens about environmental issues while offering solutions and alternatives," commented Anderson. "The nomination is also a great tribute to the quality of our production team." That team is headed by Supervising Producer **Amy Plemons** and Senior Photographer and 3-time Emmy® award winning Editor **Jon Drum**.

Seen in 160 television markets across the U.S. and several countries around the world, *Eco Company* is in its second year of syndication. It can be seen in the Bay Area on KTVU 2 every Saturday at 9:30 am.

"These films and television shows were seen by hundreds of millions of people, which means the inclusion of environmental messaging is so important," said **Debbie Levin**, president of the Environmental Media Association.