



Class of 1986

Silver Circle Profile
By: Kevin Wing

Profile: Russ Coughlan



For a very brief time early in my career, I had the wonderful opportunity to know **Russ Coughlan (SC '86)**. It was 1988, and after a couple of internships, I was hired by KGO-TV Channel 7 to work as an assignment desk assistant and production assistant in the newsroom.

He was a nice man, someone who I had seen on television, anchoring the station's 5 p.m. newscast in the 1980s and appearing on-camera as its editorial spokesman. Somewhere in there, I also knew that he had been a big-time executive for the station, serving at one time as its vice president and general manager.

When I was there, he anchored the station's morning newscast and cut-ins during *Good Morning America*. Part of my job was to organize his scripts, get him a cup of coffee when he asked for it and operate the TelePrompTer when the regular operator was ill.

I have fond memories of Coughlan. For one, he told me to stop calling him "Mr. Coughlan," ordering me to call him by his first name. Who was I to argue. But, the one thing I'll always remember about him, besides him calling me "Kev," is that he remembered me, day after day, one of many young minion upstarts at the station, hungry for a piece of the local television news pie. Of course, as he told me one morning with a wink, it always helped that my first name was the same as his sons.

It had once been said that Coughlan had "done it all" in 40 years as a Bay Area broadcaster. He gained the respect of his colleagues as a top management executive in television and radio. And, in front of the camera, at San Francisco's KGO-TV, he was well-loved by Channel 7 viewers who saw him as a genial, kind man who brought them the day's news and the occasional station editorial.

It has been nearly 22 years since Coughlan passed away of a heart attack at the age of 71, but his legacy in Bay Area television lives on.

Known to his friends as "Cog," Coughlan was inducted into the *Silver Circle* of the San Francisco/Northern California Chapter of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences in 1986 to recognize

his significant achievements in television.

To say that Coughlan was versatile during his years in Bay Area broadcasting is a gross understatement. He truly did it all, and at times, he was not only a top executive managing a leading owned-and-operated network television station, he was on the air, too.

A San Francisco native, Coughlan was born in 1919. He began his broadcasting career at a radio station in Watsonville in 1940, at the tender age of 21. When the United States entered World War II the following year, Coughlan entered the service and became one of the original staff members of Armed Forces Radio. After serving throughout the Pacific during the war, Coughlan was discharged in 1945. He headed back to the Bay Area and was hired as an announcer at KROW Radio in Oakland. In KROW's promotional advertisements, he was credited as "Russ Coglian."



In the 1950s, while still working in radio, Coughlan's television experience began, serving as the voice of "Dudley Nightshade" on the animated children's television program, *Crusader Rabbit*.



During his 12 years at KROW, he became general manager. Then, in 1957, Coughlan decided it was time to shift gears. That's when he joined KCBS Radio in San Francisco.

But, his time at KCBS would be short-lived. In 1958, Coughlan joined KGO-TV as its general sales manager, a position he held until 1968. Becoming the station's vice president and general manager in 1971, Coughlan presided over a station that, at the time, was embarking on phenomenal growth and

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popularity, thanks to its rebranded *News Scene* news format, begun in 1969 with the likes of news anchors **Fred Van Amburg (SC '88)** and **Jerry**



Jensen, meteorologist **Pete Giddings (SC '93)** and sportscaster **John O'Reilly**. Channel 7's popularity continued to grow through-

out the decade, as did Coughlan's power at the station and his visibility in the Bay Area community.

He became a familiar face on Channel 7, hosting a Sunday evening television show and a KGO Radio talk show simultaneously.

During his tenure as the station's vice president and general manager, Coughlan strengthened KGO-TV's involvement in the community with strong editorials and countless afternoon speeches. His personal commitment to community service remained strong through the years; at one time, he made more than 100 personal appearances a year.

In the 1960s, a consortium of the Bay Area's four major commercial television stations – KGO-TV, KPIX Channel 5, KRON Channel 4 and KTVU Channel 2 – was created with the interest of constructing a television tower that would improve broadcast reception throughout the Bay Area.

Sutro Tower, Inc., was the consortium, and at one time, Coughlan served as its president while serving as KGO-TV's vice president and general manager.



At the time, erecting a 981-foot iconic television tower had its critics. When it was completed in 1973, it became San Francisco's newest and then-highest landmark. Its sheer size was called "mind-blowing" at the time, perched on the city's Mount

Sutro.

In the spring of 1979, after eight successful years as KGO-TV's vice president and general manager, Coughlan was promoted by ABC, becoming vice president of the ABC Owned Television Stations group. But, it meant a move to New York.

The Big Apple couldn't hold onto him, however, and Coughlan returned to his beloved San Francisco in late 1980 to become an on-air personality for KGO-TV and KGO Radio.

He anchored Channel 7's 5 p.m. newscast in the early 1980s, then anchored the station's 6:30 a.m. newscast throughout the rest of the decade – this, at a time when local morning newscasts were a rarity in the Bay Area.

As a morning anchor, Coughlan was the kind of person who could laugh at himself. Once, in the spring of 1988, while anchoring one of the station's cut-ins during *Good Morning America*, Coughlan's microphone fell off as he delivered the morning headlines. Without missing a beat, Coughlan stood up while still live on the air, reached down to the floor to pick up the getaway microphone, then sat back down and pinned it on his necktie to finish the rest of the news. That morning, he duly impressed a shocked and startled production assistant who happened to have his son's first name, and who was operating the TelePrompTer for him that morning.

Eventually, KGO-TV recognized Coughlan's relationship with the Bay Area community was stronger than ever, so they brought him out from behind the anchor desk and sent him back into the community as a special assignment reporter.

When Coughlan passed away on December 29, 1990, of a heart attack at the age of 71, his family, friends and colleagues were saddened and shocked. News of his death spread throughout the Bay Area quickly, and the station eventually took out a full-page advertisement in the *San Francisco Chronicle* with a photograph of Coughlan as a tribute to his many years at KGO-TV and the legacy he left behind.

Coughlan was president of our NATAS chapter in 1966-67 and received the Governors' Award in 1990.

Russ Coughlan was a true legend. He remains legendary to this day.