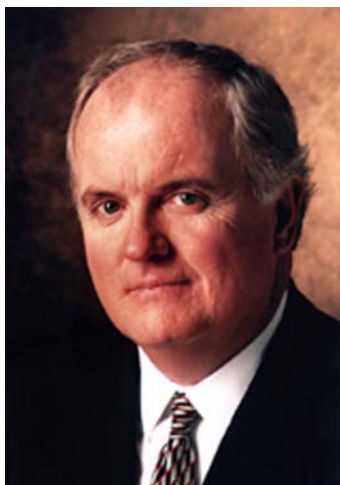


Kevin O'Brien - KTVU Years



Class of 1996

Silver Circle Profile
By: Kevin Wing



I jumped at the opportunity to interview my former boss, **Kevin O'Brien**, for this month's *Off Camera Silver Circle* profile. I had the honor and pleasure to work for him at KTVU Channel 2 for 11 years – 11 very significant years in my career. I learned from so many of my colleagues in our newsroom. Of course, I also learned tremendously from O'Brien, who was vice president and general manager of KTVU for more than 15 years.

It had been more than 10 years since I saw O'Brien, although I had spoken with him on the phone two or three times after I left the station back in 2000. I was very happy when he accepted my invitation to be this month's featured *Silver Circle* profile.

I met O'Brien in San Francisco one afternoon at Cafe des Amis, a French restaurant he co-owns on Union Street. As I approached the restaurant, I spotted him getting out of his car, which was parked directly outside the eatery's front door. He greeted me with a hearty laugh and a big smile and we went inside and sat at the bar for a few minutes, munching on French fries and downing a beverage or two before our table was ready.

O'Brien, who is a 1996 inductee of the *Silver Circle* of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences' San Francisco/Northern California Chapter, has always been bigger than life, sincerely and respectfully speaking. I respected him very much during my years at KTVU, and he always was friendly and cordial with me at the station, taking the time to chat to ask what the day's top story was and how all of us in the newsroom were going to cover it.

He's been out of the active, local television business since he left KTVU in 2001 to become president of Meredith Broadcasting. It can be said that Kevin is still involved in the industry, behind the scenes. At 68, O'Brien's mind remains filled with ambitious business ideas as if he was 25 years younger. His energy hasn't changed a bit; he is much the same as he was during his time at KTVU, where he reigned from 1986 to 2001.

"I was very excited about the opportunity with

KTVU back in 1986," O'Brien says. "First of all, Cox is the best company to work for in our business, and maybe in the country. Number two, I knew I could do something with KTVU. I could showcase my managerial talent. I knew I could fix Channel 2. I knew the town would be very receptive to my type of management style. As it turned out, it was true. There were some very fine broadcasters at the station."

But, to understand O'Brien's phenomenal success at KTVU, where he shepherded the station's incredibly tremendous growth from the mid-1980s to the beginning of the 21st century, one must look back at where he came from.

O'Brien was born in 1943 in Jersey City, New Jersey. He graduated with a Bachelor's degree from Georgetown University, and later received an MBA in marketing from Xavier University in Cincinnati.

In the mid-1960s, he served with the 18th Army Airborne Corps as an officer with the Army Security Agency.

His first job was as a salesman for KMBC, the Metromedia station in Kansas City. He remained there for four years until accepting a similar role with Metromedia Television in New York City in 1972. From there, it was on to WNEW Channel 5 in New York City (now WNYW-TV).

But, his career track seemed destined to head west. In 1975, he began a five-year reign as general sales manager at Minneapolis' WTCN (now KARE).

"It was the first television station in history to switch network affiliations," O'Brien says. "In 1979, ABC dropped Channel 9 and moved over to Channel 5 in St. Paul. I took my station from being an independent to being affiliated with NBC. It was challenging. First, you're out pitching the values of an independent station and how flexible you are, and how bad NBC is. Then, all of a sudden, you are NBC."

The westward career track headed east one more time before O'Brien aimed his sights on California. In 1980, he became general manager of WXIX in Cincinnati. Three years later, he joined WTTG in Washington, D.C. in the same capacity. Two years

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later, O'Brien took one more stab at the Big Apple, returning to New York to become the general manager at WNYW-TV, where he first worked in the early 1970s.

Soon after O'Brien's arrival, **Rupert Murdoch** purchased WNYW-TV as he formulated his plan to launch a "fourth network" – Fox. WNYW-TV would eventually become the flagship of the fledgling network when it launched in 1986.

"After that, I wasn't too comfy working there, so when a door opened here in the Bay Area, I came out here."

O'Brien joined KTVU in March 1986 as general manager. He was also senior vice president of Cox, so, in addition to managing Channel 2, he led Cox stations in St. Louis and Detroit.

Under his leadership, O'Brien began making changes to advance KTVU through the 1980s and the decade to come. One of his first orders of business was to create an optimum situation with the station's successful *The 10 o'clock News*. When O'Brien arrived, **Dennis Richmond** and **Barbara Simpson** anchored the broadcast. For years, since its inaugural airing when the station first signed on in March 1958, KTVU's 10 p.m. broadcast had been a local news staple, growing with viewers through the decades. By the 1980s, under the guidance of the station's legendary news director, **Fred Zehnder**, *The 10 o'clock News* really took off. Once O'Brien arrived, he wanted to see how much farther he could take the broadcast. He made some changes, moving Simpson to the station's then-new *2 At Noon* broadcast (now *The KTVU Channel 2 News At Noon*), where he could utilize her talents and experience on the new broadcast alongside the station's talented feature reporter, **Bob MacKenzie**. It was a combination that worked.

While that was in place, O'Brien and Zehnder made changes on the 10 p.m. weekend news, moving anchor **Elaine Corral** to team with Richmond on weeknights. With Corral's weekend co-anchor, veteran **Claud Mann**, retiring after nearly 30 years at KTVU (Mann was one of the station's first hires), O'Brien and Zehnder brought in newcomer **Leslie Griffith** to join veteran KTVU reporter **George Watson** on the weekend anchor desk.

The plan was set, and just as O'Brien expected,

KTVU became even more phenomenally successful. *The 10 o'clock News* would soon become the No. 1 prime-time newscast in the country.

"Dennis Richmond was a tremendous asset," O'Brien says. "I definitely felt he had tremendous talent, but he just wasn't being showcased right. The combo with Dennis and Elaine immediately clicked, and then we built it from there."

As the 1980s wound to a close, O'Brien set his sights on the 1990s and how he could continue to build upon KTVU's growth. With the 10 p.m. newscast where he wanted it, he began looking at mornings. In the late 1980s, the station ran cartoons and *Romper Room* repeats at 7 a.m. when the other stations aired network morning shows like the *Today* show and *Good Morning America*.

"But those shows were three hours old by the time all of us on the West Coast had the chance to see them," O'Brien says. "I thought this town could be receptive to a show that was locally-oriented, with great talent in front of the camera and behind the scenes that covered what was happening now at 7 a.m. And, I believe we could attract the right people to make it work, and the Bay Area market would react positively to it."

In 1990, KTVU began exploring how it could create such a morning program to go up against the networks at 7 a.m. No other station west of the Mississippi had ever done it. And, as it would turn out, KTVU would be the first to launch a live, two-hour morning newscast at 7 a.m. It was called *Mornings On 2*, and it launched on Jan. 2, 1991, anchored by new Bay Area arrival **Steve McPartlin** (fresh off stints with *Inside Edition* and *A Current Affair*) and venerable Bay Area television journalist **Terry Lowry**. As the show developed, more people were brought in – **Laura Zimmerman** (hired away from KNTV), **Frank Somerville** and **Ross McGowan**, the latter of whom had been a mainstay at cross-town rival KPIX since the mid-1970s, where he co-hosted *People Are Talking* with **Ann Fraser**. In later years, current *Mornings On 2* co-anchor **Tori Campbell** was brought in.

"I never dreamed how successful that show could be," O'Brien recalls. "I'm still pleasantly surprised how the Bay Area has reacted so positively to it. Fred (Zehnder) and (executive producer) **Ro (Rosemarie**

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Kevin O'Brien (Silver Circle 1996)

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Thomas Schwarz) made some wonderful talent decisions, in front of the camera and behind the scenes."

O'Brien says his goal was to establish a "family atmosphere" at Channel 2, and that's exactly what happened.

"I wanted to establish a feeling of family, a feeling of internal support for each other, and a great respect for what we did for a living, along with a love and respect for each other. I loved my job. Every month, the ratings in the morning and in the evening would grow. Everyone was happy at work. Every month, I would have a station meeting and introduce people to each other. I always wanted to talk to people one on one."

Zehnder, O'Brien says, "had spot-on ability to recognize great talent."

It is very true that KTVU has had more than just a significant impact on the life and career of O'Brien, even a decade after leaving the Jack London Square studios.

"I don't know if the industry will ever have another success story like KTVU," O'Brien says. "When I arrived, it was so broken and in such disarray and there was this negative second-class citizenry attitude among employees. In a short time, we took it to become one of the top television stations in the country."

Morale was very important to O'Brien at KTVU, from those monthly staff meetings to his daily visits to the newsroom to "check in."

"We also used to have those lovely Christmas parties at the Claremont Hotel," he says.

In 2001, O'Brien sensed it was time for change, and he accepted the position of president at Meredith Broadcasting, overseeing the operation of 12 television stations. He remained there four years. But, the experience was nothing like his years at KTVU.

"I saved the broadcast division (at Meredith), stock increased 40 points in the difficult time immediately after 9/11," O'Brien says about his Meredith tenure.

He adds that it was "not a firing, it was a crucifixion", when he left Meredith in 2004.

After Meredith, O'Brien launched Global Broadcasting.

"My timing was lousy because of the economy," he admits. "I bought WLNE (in Providence, Rhode Island) in 2007. I'm proud of my work there. Both myself and my wonderful staff made it into a great television station. But, I couldn't outrun the economy. The elevator was dropping faster than I could control it. However, in every problem, we always learned something. I'm very proud of the work there and the knowledge I gained from being an entrepreneur and an owner. And I think I know

more now than I ever did before."

In the last couple of years, O'Brien has had his eyes on San Francisco's KRON, which, he says, has simply faltered since NBC abandoned it to purchase San Jose's KNTV.

"I see KRON in 2011 like I saw KTVU in 1986," he says. "The KRON call letters are legendary in this town. It has a great dial position and really good people work there. The owners will have to sell it one day."

However, to O'Brien, "the most amazing thing is that he has not been hired as a general manager in this market since his departure from KTVU."

"After taking Channel 2 from almost nothing to, by far, the most profitable, powerful broadcast outlet in this market ever, I've been unable to get a GM job here in the Bay Area. I'm totally confused by it," O'Brien says. "I was good today as I was 10 years ago. The industry suffers from a paranoid group of managers who fear hiring a broadcaster who could possibly take their job. It's incredible. And the people who run these broadcast companies aren't aware of it. The way the other guys think, it'd be like 'I couldn't dare bring in Kevin O'Brien and take my job and make me look bad.'"

O'Brien says his philosophy has always been to bring in great, talented people who would one day take his job.

Outside of business and television, O'Brien is happily married to his wife of eight years, **Sonja**, who is a physician. The couple lives on San Francisco's Russian Hill with their three children: **Morgan**, 6, and two-year-old twins, **Shea** and **Grady**. O'Brien has an older daughter, **Shannon**, who works at WLNE in Providence.

"The kids keep me busy these days, and I wouldn't have it any other way," O'Brien says. "I spend an awful lot of time with my family. I'm a winner all the way around."

O'Brien still golfs, but admits his game has been cut down some by the fact that he's now raising three young children. He also stays busy with the numerous charities he's involved in. He is not ready to retire, and is more than ready for his next business challenge. He would like to re-enter the Bay Area television scene.

"I have had this tremendous life," O'Brien says. "My career has been wonderful, I've worked with the best broadcasters in the world, including you, and I have made a lot of money. I'm in good health, I have a great wife, beautiful children, and I live in the most beautiful city in the world. It is tough to complain."

