



# Consumer Editor Tom Vacar



**Class of 2003**

*Silver Circle Profile*  
By: Kevin Wing



Perhaps it can be said that it's a very good thing that **Tom Vacar's** childhood aspirations of becoming a NASA astronaut/engineer never materialized – for the sake of the American consumer.

For more than 40 years, Vacar has been a champion for the nation's consumers in many more ways than just one, becoming one of America's foremost consumer advocates.

And, for the better part of the last three decades, he has been based in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Vacar, consumer editor at Oakland's KTVU, has been a fixture on Bay Area television since the late 1970s, and a prominent presence at KTVU's sprawling Jack London Square studios for 22 years. Prior to joining KTVU as a freelance reporter, he spent the first half of the 1980s at KGO-TV in San Francisco, then moved to Los Angeles for several years to work at KNXT-TV (now KCBS-TV) and KTTV. Prior to moving to the Bay Area in the late 1970s to join KGO-TV, Vacar worked at WJW in Cleveland.

So, while his childhood fascination with space exploration and the universe was just one aspect of Vacar's life, it would eventually give way to his becoming a principal player for consumer advocacy. And that goes back to the late 1960s for Vacar, who was inducted into the *Silver Circle* of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences' San Francisco/Northern California Chapter in 2003.

To look at Vacar's resume and list of accomplishments is a true testament to his passion to inform and protect the American consumer.

Growing up in Salem, Ohio, Vacar graduated from Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland.

For four years beginning in 1968, he became one of the so-called "Nader's Raiders," a revolutionary group of consumer advocates headed by the nation's premier consumer guru, **Ralph Nader**. Until 1972, Vacar's main focus was to investigate automobile safety defects. Instrumental with the Nader organization, Vacar opened up Nader's office outside Washington, D.C.

"During that time, I became a newsmaker when it came to consumer advocacy, doing my best to

help consumers with their complaints," Vacar said recently during a visit at a Jack London Square restaurant, just two blocks from the KTVU studios. "In Detroit as well as in Ohio, there were plenty of automobile plants, for instance. And I was handling complaints all the time about automobile defects."

In 1972, Vacar switched gears slightly, enrolling in evening law school. While studying, he continued to be a consumer newsmaker. Vacar says consumer advocacy was a big topic in the media at that time, so that kept him very busy, responding to requests from the media to be interviewed on television.

Finally, in the mid-1970s, a friend of Vacar's learned that WJW, a Cleveland television station, was starting up a new program called *PM Magazine*, and encouraged him to apply for a position on the show.

Vacar was hired, and soon, every week for a year and a half, he would file reports on automobile maintenance with his own segment, *Your Car with Vacar*.

"Besides being a newsmaker for the media, I didn't know anything about the media," Vacar says. "I didn't know anything about television markets, or audition tapes. I was a consumer guy. But then, I was ready to be a consumer guy on TV."

Vacar eventually left WJW and *PM Magazine*, moving to the Bay Area to join KGO-TV, where he began in 1979, at a time when KGO-TV's *News Scene* was a phenomenal ratings success with its team of reporters and its main anchors, **Fred Van Amburg** (*SC 1988*) and **Jerry Jensen**.

"When I was ready to see what else was out there around the country, I sent out tapes, and I had a few bites," Vacar recalls. "But, by far, the best opportunity was with KGO-TV, so I was hired there. **Joe Barnes** was the news director at the time, and **Jim Osborn** (*SC 1989*) was general manager of the station. And, of course, there was Van Amburg."

Vacar enjoyed great success as KGO-TV's consumer reporter. He stayed until 1985, at which time he had an opportunity to move to Los Angeles, going from the No. 5 market in the United States to

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No. 2. He went to work for KNXT, which is now KCBS-TV, CBS's West Coast flagship station.

"So I got the opportunity in L.A., and, I did okay there," Vacar says. "I admit I soon learned when I was there that it was a completely different television market than the Bay Area. Los Angeles was more interested in entertainment, not consumer news."

After three years at KNXT, Vacar jumped across town to KTTV, the then-newly-christened flagship station for the fledgling Fox network. The year was 1988.

It was a pivotal year in Vacar's career, not to mention influential outside of his work in the media. His investigation of California's ever-increasing automobile insurance rates led to an insurance revolt in the Golden State, culminating with the passage of Insurance Proposition 103.

"When you're a reporter, you go up against some of the big industries in the country, like insurance companies," Vacar says.

The following year, while still working in Los Angeles, Vacar did double duty, freelancing in the Bay Area at KTVU, another Fox station, where he was hired by the station's legendary news director, **Fred Zehnder** (SC 1991), and its iconic general manager, **Kevin O'Brien** (SC 1996). For the next two years, until 1991, Vacar traveled regularly between the Bay Area and Los Angeles to manage both jobs.

In 1991, KTVU hired Vacar full-time, so he left KTTV and moved back to the Bay Area. Besides filing consumer reports on KTVU's highly-rated *The 10 O'Clock News* and its then-new morning franchise, *Mornings On 2*, Vacar also reported for the station's business franchise program, *Banmiller on Business*, featuring the station's business editor, **Brian Banmiller**. The program, although taped, aired through the 1990s on Saturday evenings, following the 10 p.m. newscast.

Besides consumer stories, Vacar is often called upon by his assignment editors and producers to tackle stories revolving around aviation, thanks to his background with aviation and aeronautics.

Recently marking his 20<sup>th</sup> year at KTVU as its full-time consumer editor, Vacar is very happy about

the way his career turned out.

"I consider myself extraordinarily lucky to have survived in the business all these years," he says. "This is a business that, say, in the last 20 years, has seen a lot of really good people disappear from it. And they should have never disappeared. It's just the nature of the business, sometimes. I'm a very lucky survivor."

If hardly missing a day of work due to illness through the years means Vacar is healthy as an ox, then he has been blessed with good health. He has never missed a day of work at KTVU due to illness. Not one. The same can be said for his attendance during his years while working in Los Angeles.

Think that's a record? It probably is. The last time he called in sick was some 30 years ago, when he stayed home from KGO-TV for three days because of a high fever. That's it.

It is very easy to tell how much Vacar enjoys his job.

"I love going out into the field every day," he says. "People have said to me, 'why don't you want to be an anchor?' And the reason is simple. I like going out on a story. There are a variety of things to be a reporter. I get to meet average folks. It's the things I see, the places I go, is what I love about my job. To me, that's extraordinary."

As you might have guessed, Vacar's work at KTVU doesn't stop there. He is also a regular on-air contributor to *This Week In Northern California*, the widely-popular public affairs program which airs on KOED.

Vacar has also been heard on KGO-FM, and for three years, hosted his own show, *Consumer Talk*.

For viewers of KTVU and other stations across the country, Vacar is widely known for *The Great American Toy Test*, a very popular, yearly franchise to which toy manufacturers would send him their products to be tested by children. Vacar would then report on the results: what the kids liked, what toys were safe for them, and which toys were most likely to break after the first go-around with a child.

Besides being recognized wherever he goes, Vacar is also no stranger to being recognized for his outstanding work. He has five local Emmy® awards to his credit – two for his work at KTVU, two for KCBS-TV and one for KGO-TV. He also received the

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Ohio State Award, a prestigious honor to which his series on failing concrete construction was recognized.

Vacar has also received the Silver Gavel Award from the American Bar Association for his series on insurance reform. Also in his trophy case is a Distinguished Service Medal from the Society of Professional Journalists, and the Streibig Trophy from the Aviation and Space Writers Association.

Besides the two Emmy® awards he received while at KCBS-TV, Vacar is also the recipient of several Golden Mike Awards, for his work in Los Angeles.

If you think being KTVU's consumer editor is a big responsibility, you guessed correctly. But, Vacar has room for more, including a personal life. His wife of 11 years is, **Sharon Navratil**, an award-winning segment and special projects producer at KTVU who has also served on the Board of Governors of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences' San Francisco/Northern California Chapter. The Vacars met in 1982, when Sharon was a singer with the San Francisco Opera. It was love at first sight.

The couple enjoy traveling, which feeds Vacar's newfound passion for photography. He has taken beautiful photographs of places he has visited, showcasing not just the places, but capturing the people of certain regions, too. He took up the hobby in 2004 during his trip to Africa.

Vacar's work ethic and passion for television reporting is characteristic of the man, a well-liked colleague in the KTVU newsroom who can be found at times whistling or humming a tune as he strolls past cubicles.

"What I admire most about people in the business is an intense work ethic, and an appreciation for this enormously interesting and creative career that we all have," he says.

"Some might say I'm an eager beaver, that I'm somewhat naïve, that I'm too intense, that I can be grouchy at times," he muses. "But who I am is a hard-working reporter who's willing to do what I'm asked to do. You can count on me day or night."

## Meet the Anchor: Elizabeth Cook



San Francisco CBS5's **Elizabeth Cook** is one of the market's newest personalities. *Off Camera* asked her a few questions recently so we could get to know her a little better.

**Q** - What should every journalist know about succeeding in the industry?

**A** - Always give your 110% and skepticism is a virtue.

**Q** - What was your favorite interview? Why?

**A** - My favorite interview was with **Julie Andrews**. She embodies class, grace and dignity. To me she will always be Mary Poppins and **Maria Von Trapp**, but after interviewing her I realized how much strength and courage she has in addition to talent.

**Q** - What attracted you to Palm Springs?

**A** - It was the first market that took a chance on hiring me for my first gig as a professional journalist.

**Q** - Personal Favorite: Small market vs. large market?

**A** - They both have their advantages but I am extremely happy in a Large Market.

**Q** - What was your most embarrassing moment on TV?

**A** - My co anchor told a joke on live TV and I was laughing so hard I couldn't even speak and the director had to go to commercial.

**Q** - Which other anchors have influenced your success?

**A** - I really admire **Brian Williams**, **Robin Meade** and **Charlie Gibson** as news personalities... and I love **Bob Dodson's** writing. But the anchors that had a direct influence on my career have been my coworkers... **Gino La Mont** and **Karen Divine** in Palm Springs and **Allen Martin** and **Ken Bastida** in San Francisco... all are incredible talents and teachers. **Dana King** has become a tremendous mentor for me especially when I started at CBS 5.

**Q** - What do you do in your spare time?

**A** - I am a huge foodie and I love exploring new restaurants with my boyfriend. I also love to travel overseas and explore the Bay Area.