

## The gospel truth Radio co-hosts, listeners feel blessed by small-town show in a not-so-small town

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Amy Ladd (left) and Judie Balacke have fun during the gospel radio show they broadcast from 7 to 10 a.m. Sundays from the WXGI studio in Richmond. Photo By: Bob Brown/Times-Dispatch

By BILL LOHMANN PHOTOS BY BOB BROWN  
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF

• **SLIDESHOW:** The gospel ladies, up close

Judie Balacke found her true calling when she lost her voice.

No longer able to sing in her church choir and seeking another outlet to demonstrate her faith, she followed an unexpected path to where she now spends her Sunday mornings: perched on a stool before a microphone in, of all places, a radio studio.

Balacke and Amy Ladd, co-hosts of "Sunday Morning Gospel With Judie and Amy" (7 to 10 a.m., WXGI-AM 950), have become devoted voices for a loyal congregation of listeners. They play music, take calls and offer prayers, all underscored with a downhome style and gentle nature sorely lacking on the airwaves of modern radio. Small-town radio in a not-so-small town.

"We feel like it's a service to the community," Balacke said in her perpetually raspy voice. "It's not about us, but about others and sharing the Word through song. We feel honored to have been chosen by [God] to be a part of this ministry."

Said Ladd, "We always say it blesses us more than the people out there [listening]. We just thoroughly enjoy it."

They laugh and joke a lot, a necessity when you're bustling around so early on Sunday mornings that it's barely light. Their show features an audio cuckoo clock and a frequent train whistle signaling, as Balacke likes to say, that "the gospel music train is in the station and ready to head out!" They announce listeners' anniversaries and birthdays and on every show blow out the candles on an imaginary birthday cake "baked" by the mysterious "Doughnut Man," who happens to be Balacke's husband, Harry. A barber by trade, Harry fuels the show's hosts with coffee -- perked in an honest-to-goodness coffee pot -- and biscuits, as well as, of course, doughnuts.

Balacke and Ladd arrive at the South Richmond studio every Sunday morning carrying plastic crates filled with CDs of music they love: Southern, country, bluegrass, gospel. Though they started with no radio experience, they both come from backgrounds of music and faith.

A lifelong member of Highland Springs United Methodist Church, Balacke joked, "I don't change too many things." She's worked for 42 years as an executive assistant at CSX Corp. and its predecessor companies, and she's been married to Harry for almost 39 years.

Her voice started fading about a dozen years ago. Trips to numerous physicians turned up nothing. Finally, she was diagnosed with spasmodic dysphonia, a voice disorder characterized by involuntary movements of one or more

muscles of the larynx. Public radio's Diane Rehm has the same disorder. There is no cure, but there is a treatment to reduce the symptoms, which Balacke undergoes periodically, that involves injecting small amounts of Botox directly into the affected muscles of the larynx.

"It paralyzes the vocal cords for about three weeks," Balacke said. "But it's not bad."

When she could no longer sing at church, she prayed, "Lord, there is nothing for me to do."

Then one Sunday she tuned her radio to WXGI-AM, a longtime bastion of country music. She came upon the late Frank T. Huffman's bluegrass-country-gospel program, "The Little White Church." She found the show inspirational, and wrote Huffman to tell him so. Huffman mentioned her letter on the air and encouraged her to write again, which she did. Eventually, she volunteered to work in the studio.

After Huffman became ill and had to leave the show, the station asked Balacke in 2002 if she would take over Sunday mornings. Since then, she has survived a format change when WXGI became a sports station affiliated with ESPN in 2004 and then the sale of the station. Balacke's first co-host was Carol Lawson. Ladd, who performs with Amy Ladd and Friends and sang for the program's Easter sunrise service show, has co-hosted with Balacke for the past three years.

The "gospel train" theme comes in part from Ladd's longtime job as a preschool coordinator for All Aboard Child Development Center in Mechanicsville. She recently took a new job as attendance secretary at Tuckahoe Middle School.

The phones are ringing when Balacke and Ladd arrive at the studio, long before they cue up the first song: "When I Start My Day With You, Lord." By the end of the show, about 100 calls will come in to Balacke, Ladd and their volunteer receptionist, Joe Ann Proffitt, who drives in from Goochland County to answer the phone and offer an on-air prayer for listeners who are ailing, grieving or simply lonely. They also take musical requests.

On a recent Sunday, the first caller -- as she often is -- was Peggy Goodman of Henrico County.

"When my husband [Lewis] and I go to bed Saturday night, we say we've got to get up early to call Judie and Amy," said Goodman. "I think they're as good as a church service."

Said another longtime listener and frequent caller, Vicki Wingo of Chesterfield County, "Those girls have made so many people's Sunday mornings."

Balacke and Ladd make a list of callers every week and maintain a database -- they refer to it on the air as "the big book" -- in which they keep track of listeners. When they haven't heard from regular callers in a while, they'll phone them to check up on them.

"They're like our family," Balacke said.

Balacke and Ladd split the advertising proceeds with the station, but they don't keep their share of the money for long. They support local musical groups or teens raising money for mission trips, and buy flowers and other gifts for listeners who need, as Ladd said, a "pick-me-up." In past years, Balacke has taken some of their listeners who might not normally get out for an evening at the Gospel Chicken House in Montpelier.

Balacke and Ladd provide "hometown inspiration," said Sharon Eichenlaub, WXGI's business manager. She said that when the station changed hands in 2006 the new owner, Red Zebra Broadcasting, considered dropping "Sunday Morning Gospel" because it didn't fit with the all-sports format, but decided to keep it on "once it was known . . . just what the show meant to the community."

During shows, Balacke and Ladd sit side-by-side. Sometimes when a favorite song is playing, they'll crank up the in-studio volume and, as Balacke puts it, "have church" -- joyfully waving their arms and swaying to the rhythm.

They close the show the same way every week, speaking directly into the same microphone as the clock ticks toward 10: "We've had a wonderful time!"

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**"SUNDAY MORNINGGOSPEL WITH JUDIE AND AMY"**

**Airs:Sundays 7-10 a.m., WXGI-AM 950**

**MEET THE GIRLS**

**Judie Balacke**

**Age: 62**

**Day job: Executive assistant, CSX Corp.**

**Family: Husband Harry, and Scooterbug, an abandoned dog they adopted two years ago. They recently lost their beloved Mr. Buzz, a yellow Lab/golden retriever who used to ride to the studio every Sunday. Mr. Buzz, who died of bone cancer in March, is actually the one who found Scooterbug.**

**Resides: Grew up in Highland Springs and still lives in eastern Henrico County**

**Hobbies: Music, family genealogy and gardening**

**Amy Ladd**

**Age: 36**

**Day job: Secretary, Tuckahoe Middle School, and preschool coordinator, All Aboard Child Development Center, Mechanicsville**

**Family: Husband Preston and 11-year-old daughter, Audrey**

**Resides: Grew up in Sandston and lives in Mechanicsville area of Hanover County**

**Hobbies: Music, walking and exercising. Sings with Amy Ladd and Friends. Details: [www.amyladdandfriends.com](http://www.amyladdandfriends.com)**