It may be true that you can’t always believe what you hear—unless you’ve tuned in to listen to the work of these Carls, who are making names for themselves in public radio

By Burl Gilyard
“Radio is the ultimate storytelling medium,” says Joseph Shapiro ’75. “You get drawn into somebody’s world more deeply when you hear his or her voice.” After nearly two decades reporting for U.S. News & World Report, Shapiro joined NPR in November 2001 to cover health, aging, disability, and family issues.

Some of Shapiro’s favorite radio reporting work appeared in a series called “Housing First,” which examined the role of housing in the lives of people with disabilities. For one report, Shapiro told the story of a woman in Kansas trying to get out of a nursing home with the help of the Topeka Independent Living Resource Center, run by a disabled activist. “These are people who had often been institutionalized themselves,” says Shapiro. “And now they're coming out and helping other disabled people.”

Shapiro also traveled to Shreveport, Louisiana, to tell the tale of Oxford House, a drug and alcohol treatment center run by its residents. The story traced a friendship between an older man and a younger man. The relationship became strained when the younger man relapsed and was kicked out of the house, and ended with the younger man still struggling with his addiction. He was readmitted to Oxford but got ousted again after another relapse. “I hope listeners got a sense of how tenuous recovery from substance abuse can be,” Shapiro says.


If all the news has started sounding the same to you,
Since joining Minnesota Public Radio as an intern in 1994, Stephanie Curtis ’92 has done a little bit of everything. She worked a stint as a producer for MPR’s documentary unit, American RadioWorks. She serves as MPR’s resident “movie maven,” recommending—and panning—current and not-so-current flicks. And in October 2001 Curtis started cohosting Sound Money, working with MPR economics editor Chris Farrell. Sound Money is carried on approximately 150 public radio stations, spanning the country from Florida to Hawaii. Curtis has hosted the show for roughly two years. (As the Voice went to press, MPR planned to move Sound Money from St. Paul to California, with plans to relaunch the program with a new host.)

Sound Money aspires to provide common sense, down-to-earth financial advice. Curtis says that one of the ongoing challenges is finding fresh angles for oft-repeated topics: Taxes, retirement, and debt management are perennials. For Curtis, the highlight of the show has always been the personal give-and-take with callers. “It’s the heart of the program,” says Curtis. “A lot of the financial advice programs, even on public radio are impersonal. The hosts don’t sound like they care about these people. There are a lot of advice shows out there, but it’s usually ‘Buy, sell, hold’—easy answers.”

Sound Money, she says, can often go beyond the bounds of finances—even when the show rarely strays from financial topics. “One of my favorites was a guy who called from Tennessee,” she says. “He and his wife had been married for more than 20 years. He said, ‘I want to save and my wife doesn’t want to save. How can we work together on this?’ They’d called for marriage counseling.”

Visit www.soundmoney.org to listen to Curtis’s stories for the show, or visit www.mpr.org and search for “Movie Maven” to listen to some of her top film picks.

Public radio has also offered a fertile career path for many Carleton graduates. Joseph Shapiro ’75, David Welna ’80, and Martin Kaste ’91 currently work as reporters for NPR. Stephanie Curtis ’92 and Julie Siple ’96 both work for the St. Paul–based Minnesota Public Radio (MPR), whose national programming and volunteer membership make it the largest and most successful regional public radio network in the country.

Collectively, these five Carls spent little time hanging out at the on-campus radio station, KRLX. Carleton doesn’t offer a journalism or communications degree. Shapiro majored in American studies, Welna in Latin American studies, and Kaste, Curtis, and...
After several years working at Minnesota Public Radio, Martin Kaste ’91 landed his dream assignment in March 2000: covering South America as a Rio de Janeiro–based reporter for NPR. The switch from St. Paul to South America might seem radical, but Kaste’s mother is Brazilian, and he is fluent in Portuguese.

One of the more dramatic stories Kaste has covered since landing in South America was the economic collapse in Argentina that reached a crisis point in December 2001. Argentina had embraced American-style free market economics, but continued to run up large debts until the system collapsed. President Fernando De La Rua resigned in disgrace as savings accounts across the country were frozen and riots erupted. “It wasn’t just abstract politics,” Kaste says. “In Argentina, what was happening on a day-to-day basis directly affected whether people could afford to pay their tuition or their light bill. They went through five presidents in a week.”

The upheaval made him more appreciative of the economic stability of the United States. “It’s amazing to watch a whole economy, a whole society, just dropping off a ledge. It’s an accelerated laboratory experiment in basic economics,” Kaste says. “It was an incredible reminder that nothing is guaranteed. It’s very easy to think, growing up in America, that the basics are safe. I don’t think there are any guarantees. There’s a lot for us to learn there.”

Curtis, best known as the recent host of the MPR-produced *Sound Money*, says that public radio programming offers listeners a less frantic, more in-depth alternative to modern commercial radio. “Commercial stations have to worry constantly about their ratings,” says Curtis. “Because we aren’t trying to cut away to commercials, we can actually take the time to talk about issues.” Quirky documentary programs that feature stories that take time to unfold, like *This American Life*, wouldn’t stand a chance in commercial radio.

In-depth discussion doesn’t mean that public radio is dry, though. Its news and feature stories are often rich with real-life drama. “Probably the most exciting story I’ve ever covered was the botched coup against [Venezuelan president Hugo] Chavez,” says Kaste. “It was a surreal few days. When there’s a grab for power in a country, all of a sudden you realize how vital the media are,” says Kaste, noting that the Venezuelan media had a reputation for being notoriously anti-Chavez. The attempted coup to oust Chavez in April 2002 failed: Chavez returned to office within a few days. In that environment, says Kaste, the world—and Venezuelans themselves—depended on independent media accounts to find out what was happening. “Domestic media institutions had been sucked into the political process. As outsiders, we could still do our work.”
Siple first dabbled in journalism during her senior year, when she worked briefly at CNN as an intern in Washington, D.C. Behind the network glitz, Siple says, the experience actually soured her somewhat on the profession. “I didn’t enjoy it,” she says. “I knew after that experience that I didn’t want anything to do with [television] journalism. It was too much about getting a story and getting it first, and not about understanding what’s going on out there.” Public radio is in a very different business, Siple says, “There’s a conscious effort to provide some sort of context, and I think that’s lacking in some other forms of journalism.”

In the end, public radio may succeed because it connects with listeners by focusing on stories, not sound bites. It’s a modern-day equivalent of telling tales around the fire, and people connect with it because its story-telling capabilities—the sounds, the cadences, the structures—are just like those we’ve used for millennia. “I look for good personal tales,” says Shapiro. “They become ways you can tell a larger story.”

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