

—Slug:.....COMM-0842.bratt.bctv_at_50
—Contributor.....Annie Landenberger
—Contributor email.....verbatim@gmail.com
—For section.....News
—Format.....News feature
—Dateline.....Brattleboro
—Article Number:.....42670

Notes from editor (not for publication):

Nice job, Annie. It did kind of end abruptly, so I moved a few things into a last section. I also added some info from the Legislative committee on PEG.

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

‘Essential to the strength and spirit of our communities’

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

BCTV marks its 50th anniversary with a special
celebration and looks ahead to new responsibilities, new
technology, and an additional source of funding: the state

####END SUBHED####

TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

Nearly 70 creators, producers, and fans of Brattleboro
Community Television (BCTV) traversed a red carpet into the
Stone Church on Nov. 14 for the local cable access station’s
annual Producers’ Party/awards night, yoked with its 50th
anniversary celebration.

11 A huge screen loomed over Aaron Wallace, aka Oh Dad,
12 playing on stage as people met, mingled, and queued up for a
13 buffet catered by 802 Soul Kitchen.

14 As award winners, families, and friends took to the
15 tables, the mood was upbeat in an air of accomplishment and
16 hometown pride.

17 BCTV Board Chair Garret Harkawik opened the
18 presentations.

19 Noting that BCTV produced 1,300 local programs this
20 year, he thanked sponsors, underwriters, and donors for making
21 that possible.

22 The celebration aimed, said Harkawik, to recognize “a
23 handful of producers or individuals whose contributions
24 exemplify BCTV’s motto: Be creative, be informed, be local.”

25 The awards (see sidebar) show the many ways that
26 “creating local content is a powerful tool to share your
27 enthusiasm, views, information, talent, dedication, and
28 enjoyment,” he said.

29 “It’s been an amazing 50 years,” Harkawik said.

30 **‘Everything gets its fair chance’**

31 BCTV’s executive director, Johnny Gifford, then took the
32 mic: “BCTV is a special organization, not just in this community,
33 but in the larger scope of things,” he said.

34 Based on his conversations with “colleagues from a lot of
35 other stations” across the region and the nation, Gifford
36 confidently asserted that “we have a higher participation rate in
37 community media per capita than the vast majority of other
38 centers across the nation.”

39 Often Brattleboro — and Vermont as a whole — serves
40 as a model for community media elsewhere in the country, he
41 added.

42 After screening a video greeting of congratulations and
43 gratitude from U.S. Rep. Becca Balint, Gifford added that “we

44 also got a really nice letter from [U.S. Sen.] Bernie Sanders that
45 came in last night.”

46 Gifford reviewed highlights from the past year, as well as
47 advances and improvements. He noted, too, that from a June
48 gathering in Boston of the Foundation of the Alliance for
49 Community Media, BCTV and its partners came home with six
50 hometown media awards — “the most national awards of any
51 other attendee — among a couple hundred — at the conference,”
52 Gifford said.

53 Among those, BCTV won for overall excellence in its
54 division (stations with annual budgets between \$300,000 and
55 \$650,000).

56 Asking all who produced shows in the past year to stand,
57 Gifford launched the awards. Each was accompanied by a video
58 created by Production Manager Nolan Edgar, who’d also done a
59 summary video that opened the presentations.

60 Congratulating all recipients, Gifford added, “Everyone
61 deserves to have a voice on BCTV — no matter where you’re
62 from or what you do.”

63 Programming is created “by what’s coming into us and
64 what we’re producing,” Gifford explains.

65 A day of its around-the-clock broadcasting might include
66 Brattleboro Gallery Walk coverage; an episode of Wendy
67 O’Connell’s *Here We Are*; a Friends of Island Park Meeting;
68 Theatre Adventure’s performance of *The Prince and the Goblins*;
69 worship services; *Financial Fitness*; music; and, of course, various
70 board meetings.

71 “We’re trying to give it all equal airtime,” Gifford says of
72 programming. “Everything gets its fair chance.”

73 **‘The uniqueness of this** 74 **community’**

75 Before coming to BCTV, Gifford, from Maynard,
76 Massachusetts, had done similar work as an intern at Harvard

77 University. He then served as executive director at Springfield
78 (Vermont) Area Public Access TV.

79 As a teen, Gifford was a leader in the public access
80 station housed at his high school.

81 “I was there every single day after school, doing a radio
82 show, helping out with TV shows, editing municipal meetings,”
83 he told *The Commons*. “I ended up leading the organization my
84 senior year.”

85 He then went on to Fitchburg State University, where he
86 majored in film and video production with a minor in music.

87 Why was he drawn to BCTV? “It was very clear to me
88 from the beginning after I was introduced to community media in
89 Vermont that BCTV was really ahead of the curve,” Gifford said.

90 “I attribute that to [former BCTV Executive Director] Cor
91 Trowbridge 100% and to the uniqueness of this community: I
92 think we’re at this nexus of creativity and population density,” he
93 said.

94 With the leadership of Trowbridge, who led the nonprofit
95 from 2006 to 2024, “it was all facilitated in this really strong,
96 community-minded way,” Gifford continued.

97 Addressing viewership, he noted that it’s complicated to
98 track the number of viewers given that some view BCTV content
99 via its two Comcast cable stations, while others stream the
100 broadcast or the station’s archives via the station’s website or its
101 YouTube profile.

102 Gifford said the station presumes that diversifying outlets
103 can only increase BCTV viewership.

104 “We post most of our programs to YouTube, and from
105 there we import those to our website. So there are multiple
106 places to view the same content. We use YouTube analytics.” He
107 also tracks views of occasional short videos posted on Facebook
108 and Instagram.

109 Viewership impacts revenue. Whereas five years ago,
110 Gifford estimates, cable subscriber revenues contributed to 80%

111 to 90% of the operating budget (now \$424,000), that number has
112 steadily decreased.

113 Now “probably more like 70% of our revenue comes
114 from Comcast and their obligation to fund public access” as
115 people have moved to other viewing options, he said.

116 To compensate, Gifford explained, in the mid-2010s
117 Trowbridge “started assigning value to the work we do. It’s pretty
118 traditional for public access stations to do things for free all the
119 time,” but Trowbridge steered a new course.

120 “Fees were attached to BCTV’s covering selectboard
121 meetings, school board meetings, and local events,” Gifford said.
122 “Now, all eight Windham County municipalities served [by
123 Comcast] — and a few other towns occasionally — pay for
124 services, most on a contract basis.”

125 If you were to add up the hours involved, Gifford says,
126 the fees are “pretty minuscule,” but they do help cash flow —
127 and public perception of BCTV’s worth.

128 **New funding — from the state**

129 Gifford highlighted an emerging source of revenue for
130 BCTV: from the state budget.

131 All 24 Vermont access management organizations are
132 members of the Vermont Access Network (VAN), established in
133 2001. Designated by the IRS as a tax-exempt business league,
134 “it’s not a nonprofit, it’s a collective of nonprofits,” said Gifford,
135 who serves on the organization’s board as its secretary.

136 VAN operates a statewide public access channel
137 (Vermont Community TV) and the Vermont Media Exchange,
138 which lets member stations share content for broadcast. It also
139 engaged a lobbying firm to advocate for its interests in
140 Montpelier.

141 As stations statewide started recognizing that cable
142 subscriber revenue was quickly declining, players wanted to seek
143 a permanent funding solution from the state. Thus, the Vermont
144 Legislature established a study committee in the 2019–20

145 biennium, chaired by Balint, then a state senator, which explored
146 options for funding local PEG (public/educational/government)
147 programming providers.

148 While a concrete solution has not yet emerged, Gifford
149 explained, “the state had been kind enough to include one-time
150 appropriations for us in their annual budget.”

151 From 2020 to 2024, PEG organizations statewide were
152 receiving these annual infusions, the amount of which, “while
153 not great, had steadily increased,” he said. In 2024, “we almost
154 had a [bill](#) make it across the finish line, but it died at the end.”

155 Then the Vermont Legislature, the Joint Fiscal Office, and
156 the secretary of state all agreed that the VAN was an essential
157 service and that community media should be supported in the
158 governor’s budget.

159 “So as of this year, we’re a line item,” Gifford said.
160 “We’re in the budget when the governor first starts writing it.
161 Which is huge.”

162 A staff and a ‘hodgepodge of 163 people’

164 In addition to Gifford and Edgar, BCTV employs Helena
165 Leschuk, operations manager, and Van Wile, content manager.
166 Five part-time staff round out the operation.

167 In addition to Harkawik, board members include George
168 Anthes, Lynn Barrett, Alex Beck, Nancy Wolfe, Renee Woliver,
169 Alex Hacker, and Seth Thomas.

170 Having first joined BCTV as an intern through Leland &
171 Gray Union High School, Edgar was previously its content
172 manager. He credits mentors Trowbridge, Roland Boyden, and
173 Jeff Mastroianni — all of whom have moved on from BCTV — for
174 his advancement in a career that he started to shape in high
175 school some 15 years ago.

176 Today, Edgar oversees day-to-day operations to ensure
177 that whatever is being filmed and created goes smoothly. And he
178 does most of the trainings, he says.

179 Of his path, Edgar shares: “When I started, I didn’t
180 imagine enjoying it so much or really believing in [BCTV’s
181 mission], but I really feel like I fit in in this world. I really enjoy
182 being here.”

183 In addition to staff, members are the backbone of the
184 creation of original content. Members pay a modest annual fee to
185 secure use of and training in filming, editing, and studio
186 equipment. “But if a membership fee is not doable for someone,
187 we’re not turning them away,” Edgar said.

188 BCTV has roughly 50 members. “It’s sort of a
189 hodgepodge of people,” Gifford explains, “some just creating
190 their own content, some volunteering with BCTV, some doing
191 both.”

192 BCTV has also welcomed interns — like Edgar — over
193 the years, either by individual arrangement or in programs
194 developed for and with regional schools.

195 Hinsdale High School, Gifford added, has a “pretty
196 exceptional” program that allows high school seniors to pursue
197 an internship in a career of their choosing, fully backed and
198 supported by the school.

199 **Leveraging technology for** 200 **communciation**

201 Founded in 1976 — eight years after the first PEG public
202 access station opened in Dale City, Virginia — BCTV became the
203 first station to do so in Vermont. It’s been a peripatetic journey,
204 but the organization is in such a strong place that Gifford has
205 heard former members and staffers say they wish they were there
206 now.

207 “We’re facilitators,” Gifford said. “We do produce a lot of
208 our own [...] but really we’re facilitating content being produced
209 by the community.”

210 “I think we’re just a helping hand along the way,” as
211 some folks enter the scene with savvy and others need more
212 coaching and training, he said.

213 The BCTV team has also built an audio system that can
214 travel with staff to productions, thus addressing audio quality
215 issues that often arise when streaming and filming community
216 events.

217 The technology was intended to “make our community
218 look and sound good,” said Gifford, a musician and a “self-
219 proclaimed audio guy.”

220 “We built a system to serve a proven method of
221 delivering high-quality audio feed both to the room amplified
222 and to BCTV’s live broadcast,” he explained.

223 Among other recent advancements, BCTV can now
224 generate live captions and send them to multiple places at once.

225 “People in a room can read the whole transcript of
226 what’s being said in real time,” Gifford said, describing it as an
227 ongoing effort “to make our programming as accessible as
228 possible for all people: That’s really the point of it for what we’re
229 doing.”

230 Recently, too, BCTV has integrated LiveU Solo Pro, a
231 device that processes the data from a field recording for
232 streaming via YouTube, Facebook, and other streaming platforms.

233 This technology “allows us to broadcast from anywhere”
234 allowing delivery of news breaking in the community, Gifford
235 said.

236 “If there’s a disaster, a bridge collapses, or there’s a flood
237 somewhere, we could send a camera out” to be able to grab
238 footage, to broadcast live in the moment,” he said.

239 Gifford added that BCTV is working with Brattleboro
240 and other municipalities to be a part of their respective town
241 emergency plans, “so that when something goes wrong, we can

242 be an entity to deliver important, of-the-moment information
243 when that happens.”

244 **‘BCTV shows up for us every** 245 **single day’**

246 In creating the committee to explore PEG funding, the
247 Legislature asserted that “public, educational, and government
248 (PEG) access television provides an essential community service
249 in Vermont.”

250 “PEG access television extends the concept of
251 participatory democracy by providing not only a window to State
252 and local government proceedings but also a forum for citizens
253 to voice their viewpoints and opportunities for life-long learning
254 and cultural exchange,” reads the text of a bill that led to further
255 study and recommendations by a consulting firm.

256 Of BCTV — the mission of which is “to promote civic
257 engagement and transparency, and to empower community
258 members to share their knowledge, views and creativity, without
259 prejudice” — Kate Trzaskos, executive director of the Downtown
260 Brattleboro Alliance, is one of many community leaders who
261 acknowledge BCTV’s importance locally.

262 “In this moment, access to reliable local news and events
263 is essential to the strength and spirit of our communities. BCTV
264 shows up for us every single day, offering a platform that truly
265 keeps us connected,” she said.

266 Assessing the health of BCTV today, Gifford said, “I just
267 think we’re a very welcoming and engaging center. And again, I
268 attribute that largely to my predecessor, Cor. She’d curated a staff
269 that works really well with the community, and that makes
270 people want to come and work with us.”

271 In turn, that staff has “made sure that what we’re offering
272 for media and editing equipment — and everything related — is
273 state of the art and accessible.” And that help is available at each
274 step “to empower and teach people.”

275 Of the future, Gifford said, "I think a lot of roles we play
276 now are going to remain evergreen and, in this current political
277 climate, they're more important than ever."

278 He said that ensuring "access to free speech, civic
279 proceedings, and civic transparency is one of the most important
280 roles we play."

281 "And that's not going to be expiring anytime soon, I don't
282 think," Gifford said.

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL####

283 To learn more about BCTV and its history, and to stream
284 its broadcasts live or archives of its programs on demand, visit
285 brattleborotv.org.

####END BIO/COATTAIL####

LAST ISSUE IN WHICH THIS FILE CAN BE RUN:

####BEGIN MAXISSUE####

286 0

####END MAXISSUE####

LINKS:

####BEGIN LINKS####

287

####END LINKS####

VIDEO:

####BEGIN VIDEO####

288

####END VIDEO####

LOGLINE (SOCIAL MEDIA):

###BEGIN LOGLINE###

###END LOGLINE###