##### [00:00:03.890] - Brian Shelton

I'm Brian Shelton. And you're listening to Harper Talks, a co-production of Harper College Alumni Relations and Harper Radio today on Harper Talks. I'm excited to speak with Tom Schnecke. Tom is a graduate of Harper Harbor College, a 2009 Distinguished Alumni Award recipient, and is Vice President of operations and engineering for WBBM CBS 2 Chicago. Tom came to Harper College in 1976 on a whim, picked up a brochure on electronics, engineering, technology, and the rest, they say, is history. Tom is an especially important person to WHCM. He served as its adviser for 17 years. Tom joined me for Harper talks over Zoom.

##### [00:00:52.870] - Brian Shelton

Hey, Tom, thanks for being here on Harper Talks. How are you doing today?

##### [00:00:56.070] - Tom Schnecke

Good afternoon. It is great to talk to you.

##### [00:00:59.120] - Brian Shelton

Great to talk to you. Hey, I read in your bio that you came to Harper College in the mid 1970s, and I got to ask, what was this place like during that time?

##### [00:01:08.690] - Tom Schnecke

You know, you drove in the very same front entrance off Algonquin Road, the center of the universe for Harper at the time was Building A.

##### [00:01:17.150] - Brian Shelton

Right.

##### [00:01:17.790] - Tom Schnecke

And I had never stepped foot in. It was during senior year of high school, and there was a carousel with three full brochures of all of the different divisions and class offerings in Harper. And I grabbed one, and it was literally as you walked in double doors of Building A.

##### [00:01:39.650] - Brian Shelton

That's fantastic. Maybe we should go back to Brochures then.

##### [00:01:42.940] - Tom Schnecke

Well, it's old, and basically the edge of the Earth was the library and building D and building F.

##### [00:01:51.820] - Brian Shelton

Okay.

##### [00:01:52.020] - Tom Schnecke

And that was literally the edge of the Earth.

##### [00:01:55.390] - Brian Shelton

What about the hair and the clothes?

##### [00:01:57.970] - Tom Schnecke

Well, I have a prom picture from the mid 70s that has a color of blue that I'm not sure I've seen since then. And my hair back then mimics several album covers. You can probably look up and see where parts down the middle. I was more Glenn Campbell, but there was a lot of hair going on up there and Bell bottoms and things like that were not uncommon.

##### [00:02:25.230] - Brian Shelton

So speaking of Building A WHCM, the campus radio station is located in Building A. It's pretty much always been there. How did you get involved with WHCM?

##### [00:02:34.330] - Tom Schnecke

I was the kid who grew up with a transistor radio in my ear, listening to the great rock and roll radio stations of Chicago in the 60s and early 70s. And I knew I wanted a piece of something of that nature. As I hit high school, Hoffman State High School didn't exist at that point, which I graduated from my first year was at Conant, and the first year of Conant got a single camera record deck for the AV apartment with one camera through an open reel tape deck. And they used it for the Scout, basketball and gymnastics. And I was fascinated by the fact that I loved the sports broadcasting I'd seen on television and really did the first basketball, scouting for the coaches at Conant with a single camera. My freshman year of high school, there was a special called Elvis Aloha from Hawaii, and it was the first live satellite broadcast of a concert that went around the world by a satellite. And I decided from that moment on, I wanted to know how that was done. At about the same time the Vietnam War was just wrapping up. And Bob Hope had those specials that he'd had since the forties of World War II, where he went overseas. And they were broadcasting Christmas shows from Vietnam. And they happened to a cutaway of a camera operator on a platform recording the show and literally like a light bulb. I want to do that. That's what I want to do.

##### [00:04:11.310] - Brian Shelton

That's really cool. You know that Elvis Aloha from Hawaii album is one of my absolute favorite albums of all time. I have it on vinyl here at the house. My mom's a huge Elvis fan, and that show was absolutely amazing. It's so cool. That was something that helped spark your interest in your career. That's really neat.

##### [00:04:26.610] - Tom Schnecke

That program was so far ahead of its time. There's so many great backstories about producer Marty Pacetta went to Elvis himself to try and get Elvis to be more mobile on stage. Elvis would just stand in place. He pitched the first runway where you'd walk up and down. They literally had to put equipment on barges from California to get it out to Honolulu to even do the show. They certainly didn't have giant TV trucks and concert rigs on the island. And so just things that had never, ever been dreamed of and certainly not live all happened that night.

##### [00:04:59.180] - Brian Shelton

That's amazing. So when you found WHCM at Harper College, what was your involvement there? What was it like then? What was the status of the station? I know it was not an FM radio station at the time.

##### [00:05:10.200] - Tom Schnecke

Oh, not at all. And it's ironic. Just several years before I started, there actually had been a pitch to make it an FM radio station. It was not uncommon. There were many schools around the northwest suburbs, mainly east of Harper who had licenses. Maine Township, New Trier stations like that all had the famous ten watt FM's. So in the early 70s, it was not unheard of for a school radio station to have an FCC license. Best folklore I can put together the board at that time. Harper was just so new, passed on making it over the air radio station. And so we jokingly called it a PA with call letters. It went to a bunch of different little nooks and crannies around campus where there were open speakers. All the speakers in the cafeteria had it on. And so when we're on, you heard it. And there was in the middle room there where your transmitter is now, we're literally a big roll of vine controls. It literally said, Cafe, Building A, Building D all over campus. And it was just wires in the tunnels that got our sound around campus. In the late 70s, early 80s, when cable TV came along, one of my first pitches was, well, one of the things cable providers had to do is provide public access channels.

##### [00:06:26.230] - Tom Schnecke

And Harper had basically a Slideshow running on his first public access channel. And I pitched having WHCMs audio go on that slide show on the Harper Channel. So that was really our first foray into leaving campus. It would be another ten years before the licensing process would even be attempted again.

##### [00:06:46.970] - Brian Shelton

Wow. What was the format back then? I mean, what kind of music were students playing?

##### [00:06:51.700] - Tom Schnecke

In 1976, When I started at Harper College top 40 radio was still the format of the day huge 20/30 share for WLS music radio, WCFL, the FM's were just coming into their own. But contemporary music in a high energy format was really the music of the day. And the alternate was called alternative rock, which is really where WXRT and company got their roots and things like that. So what we finally settled on was those were kind of the edges and in the middle when it got kind of quieter on campus from three to seven, we literally did like an easy listening soft rock format. And the station went from eight in the morning till ten at night.

##### [00:07:35.150] - Brian Shelton

That's really cool. How did you wind up being the advisor for WHCM? How did that happen?

##### [00:07:42.910] - Tom Schnecke

So almost on a natural path. So my first year as a disc jockey and then, as you know, you could become a student leader. And I became the station manager. My second year of Harper, the third year at Harper, I became the director of engineering, chief engineer position, which was there were four positions. There were station manager, program director, chief engineer, and music director as formal jobs. At that, parallel to that, I had been working at WMAQ Radio on the request lines with the eye of getting my FCC license to become a full time engineer there. And so I was diving in and out of part time/full time role, which is why it took multiple years to go through Harper. And what I started getting was as the radio station would offload equipment. Harper picked up an old tape deck or maybe tape cartridges that were no longer good enough to be on broadcast. But we could use them for another couple of years. And so informally, I really started just fixing things and keeping it going for some strange reason. And I can't remember why the equipment of WHCM was never part of what was maintained by whatever you would consider IT. We certainly didn't call them back then, but we were really on our own as a student activities thing. And so I was really the repair Department and spent a lot of Thanksgiving weekends because you can only work on it when we weren't on the air. And so finally, Jean Pankanin, who was the director of student activities in 1981, said, how would you like to be advisor now, at this point, I am a full time employee at NBC, working in radio. And I just said, I can advise but there has to be an understanding. I'm not on campus, and it had good parts and bad parts. It had great parts because I had total exposure to the real world of the Chicago radio market. But then again, there had to be an on campus presence for the students. And so we worked on a balance there for a long time. I literally did it until 1998, when I became a manager at NBC and said, look, their expectation is I'm on call 24 hours a day, so that leaves zero time that I could be on call for Harper. And this really needs to grow back into a role on campus. And that's when I transitioned to Dave Dluger.

##### [00:10:02.910] - Brian Shelton

Yeah. And then after Dave Deluge, it was me. So, yeah, it's kind of an interesting chain here.

##### [00:10:08.530] - Tom Schnecke

But I would like to point out, sir, that that shows management stability over the course of the years. Look at that!

##### [00:10:15.850] - Brian Shelton

That's right. Yeah. Longtime advisors, that's for sure. You mentioned working at (W)MAQ and working at NBC. I wanted to talk about that. But what was your educational path after Harper? Because I know you've gone on and I know you have a bachelor's and a master's degree, I believe.

##### [00:10:32.310] - Tom Schnecke

Yes. So I did everything in reverse, and I'm not sure I would advise it. It worked for me. I had to make a really hard decision in 1979 of full time employment versus finishing school. And I'm glad I did what I did just the way seniority lists work out and being able to stay in the game. But the older I got, the more it bothered me that it was unfinished business. And so in the late 80s, NBC sold WMAQ radio, and I was transferred to television. And it really just felt like I just needed to round things out a little better. And so in the early 90s, I applied to Columbia College because knowing I'm full time that there was no other choice. And I loved Columbia. But I couldn't certainly go out of state or go anywhere. And I had a family at this point and literally was working five in the morning to one in the afternoon as the technical director doing news and was going school one to nine to finish two years of bachelor's work. And I graduated the bachelor's in 93. And then a couple of years later said, Well, if I figured out how to do this, and it's a much longer story why I was inspired to go to Northwestern, but I just thought that would be the icing on the cake for me as a kid who grew up on the Southeast Side dreaming about Chicago media to study it at a place like Northwestern. And so I applied to Northwestern in the summer of 94, and it was accepted into the program for a two year course that went from the fall of 95 through the spring of 97 and got a Masters in radio, TV film from Northwestern.

##### [00:12:10.450] - Brian Shelton

That's great. I interview a lot of Harper alumni, and I might get in a little heat for this, but that's okay. That's all right. I always go on their LinkedIn profiles and check them out before I interview them. And it's interesting. Yeah, it's interesting that not all of them list Harper College as part of their education. But Harper College is proudly listed on your LinkedIn, even though you also went to Columbia and Northwestern. Can you tell me a little bit about why Harper is so important to you?

##### [00:12:40.010] - Tom Schnecke

Harper has been something very special to me my whole life. I wasn't the A student in high school. I was in class. I did the best I could, and I'd like to think of a lot of it had to do with there was so much churn with switching schools and being in a brand new school that was literally starting from scratch and having no upper class mentors pick whatever reason, others did fine. I didn't do so well, and it changed on a dime in the fall of 1976, when I went to Harper. If you set my senior year report card next to my first Harper report card, you'd say it wasn't the same person. And I happened across some amazing instructors in that very first semester. A gentleman named Gil Tierney who taught and later ran the English Department, a legendary math teacher named Harold Cunningham, who taught every class I took there and so many others that maybe I didn't have a class with but certainly Mary Jo Willis and the theater Department and WHCM, we're always doing something together. I mean, how do you not get around Mary Jo and not be inspired? We've remain great friends. I took away such amazing friendships from Harper, and with the exception of, I believe, 2000 2010, I have to check my notes. But I've taken a class at Harper every decade since the 70s, including last January.

##### [00:14:06.210] - Brian Shelton

That's fantastic. You became a certified drone pilot at Harper, right?

##### [00:14:10.110] - Tom Schnecke

I did. And part of staying relevant as a boss and as an employee is the reinvention of yourself. And what's going on out there. And part of my role now is the health and safety of our crews on the street. And drone photography is a huge portion of that. And to be a drone photographer for us or any other television station, you have to be an FAA pilot to run that drone commercially. And I thought if I'm going to do this, then I should understand it. And when I saw that Harper was offering it, I couldn't wait to sign up and say that it happened at Harper and just want to say I do believe I am drone pilot 001 from Harper. And having been at WHCM since the start, I'm pretty excited. Stuff like that is what gets me going every day.

##### [00:15:00.680] - Brian Shelton

That's awesome. Yeah. I'm going to sign up for that program myself. You mentioned Mary Jo. I was just in a production with Mary Jo. We did a radio drama of It's A Wonderful Life, and I got to work with Mary Jo for about eight weeks. And she's just absolutely fantastic.

##### [00:15:13.270] - Tom Schnecke

She is a pillar of why Harper stands so much great work over the years. So much mentorship. What she did for that piece of Harper could be its own program. It just could.

##### [00:15:29.650] - Brian Shelton

So you're talking about what you're doing today. I know that your role at CBS changes a bit, especially with everything going on with COVID. But you're vice President of Operations and Engineering at CBS 2 Chicago. It's kind of a silly thing to ask a broadcasting person, but what's your day like, what's it supposed to be like? I guess.

##### [00:15:49.890] - Tom Schnecke

You know what? It's what makes you come back every day because no 2 hours are the same, much less two days, two weeks, two years, two months. Covid has been the unique experience of my life. It Ironically feels like everything that happened before was to train us all to how to deal with this. If you had told me two years ago that we would be doing Chroma key weather from people's apartments and basements and family rooms in high def, I just said, okay, first of all, why? But why would we do that? And things that were invented by us and for us over the last 18 months in the industry have been nothing short of fascinating.

##### [00:16:30.020] - Brian Shelton

Yeah, it's been pretty amazing for us. We had to do this with the students. We had to send all the students home and figure out how to get them to broadcast from home as well. And we certainly don't have the budget or the help that CBS has. But what you've done because I do watch CBS in Chicago has just been amazing. And you can kind of sort of always tell when somebody's at home, but it looks pretty darn good. You've done a really great job.

##### [00:16:52.570] - Tom Schnecke

We're not fooling anybody. And people's pets and dogs walk through. And in some cases, you can tell it's their family room. When we had our anchors at home, we didn't try and dress it up with logos and sets. It's the pandemic. Everybody got it. But what was really neat was we would go to vendors and say, Could you make such and such do this because they pitch us? I got this thing. Can do that. And I'd say, But I don't need that. But, boy, if it could do this. And, boy, two weeks later, you'd get a phone call and they'd say, Here reload the app and you'd go, wow, excellent. And so the innovation and people from the inside would come to me and say, I have an idea. I know it's crazy. And I'm like, Is that any crazier than what we're doing right now? And they're like, Well, no, I'd say, what do you got? And I would say nine and a half times out of ten, it became standard operating procedure.

##### [00:17:43.780] - Brian Shelton

That's really cool. That's the great thing about working in the media industry is every day is different and you get to innovate and come up with new ideas. And I'm sure that's what's kept you busy and going in the career as long as you've been there.

##### [00:17:55.260] - Tom Schnecke

Yeah. Like I said, I come in today, unlike any other day. There's certainly end of the year. There's a lot going on and things getting settled. But we have shows at each end of the day. And then I always laugh because I say, we all go home at 6:30, 7 o'clock and we still have a major show ahead of us at 10:00 p.m.. And is everything ready for that and where the crews going to be? And do they have what they need? And by the time that show ends, literally, the next team is walking in the front door to do tomorrow morning's newscast literally at 11:00 at night. And so the wheel just keeps going. And it's having the resources and making sure people have what they need to do that. That's what I do.

##### [00:18:36.670] - Brian Shelton

That's fantastic. Hey, Tom, why don't you do a little humble bragging for me? How many Emmys have you won?

##### [00:18:43.210] - Tom Schnecke

I believe. Seriously, I think it's 17. I've laughed. It's been in three very distinct categories, which I'm really proud of. The first one was for called Chicago Bears Weekly that was on Channel 5 back in the 90s. And it was a Bear's recap preview show for the week. And it's really one of the first production shows I worked on as a technical director. And then I was talking to someone today about what I still consider to this day to be really one of the hardest, most operationally, challenging events of my career was New Year's Eve of 1999, January 1, 2000, the famous Millennium. It was a program from McCormick Place, where I had a sports production truck parked on the east side of Lake Shore Drive. But eleven cameras all around the different buildings in McCormick Place in the Hyatt Hotel for the city's World feed of the Millennium. And this is a pre cell phone, wireless, digital microwave world. This was a lot of cable that went in between Christmas and New Year's and yet was able to do a show that had anchors in the Black building along Lake Shore Drive. But a performance on stage in the Arie Crown Theater and people over in the lobby of the Hyatt Hotel on McCormick Place. So that was that the other two are just two things that will be close to my heart forever are the Chicago Auto Show and the Chicago marathon. I was lucky enough to be involved in the reinvention of the broadcast of both of those. Was it able to provide some technology and some production input on just new ways to take something that was a really great show and just bring it forward technologically and production value wise by bringing the digital motorcycles from the Olympics to the Chicago Marathon for the first time and at the Chicago Auto Show, literally modeling, covering the auto show, like covering golf and in the pre microwave days and such everything was cables everywhere. And so when you cable the golf course for broadcast, you literally went down the fairways on the sidelines. Well, how do you do that in the auto show? Well, I discovered there's a catwalk system at McCormick Place, so literally did a matrix of cables above your head in the entire footprint of the auto show, and then came down those columns and made drops where you could plug in a camera and a microphone, do a report unplugged, move to another pillar, plug the same gear back in. And that had never been done before. And I was really proud of that. So those are kind of the areas I like to go and do broadcasting where it typically isn't. I joke around, anybody can go down the studio. It's already here. Give me an empty room and say, I need to show out of here. And that's what I truly love.

##### [00:21:28.560] - Brian Shelton

That's fantastic. Love it. You became a Harper Distinguished alumni in 2009. What was that like?

##### [00:21:35.830] - Tom Schnecke

You know what? It was really fun. I mean, I'm so excited to what Harper has grown from and what it's become with the new buildings and to walk back in there and just see things we'd only dreamed about and talked about and the spaces that students have and the resources that a Harper student has available now are just fascinating and stunning. And again, it goes back to my pride of Harper. That was a really big deal to me that I just think because of that transition I spoke of earlier in the mid 70s that to then take that and be recognized for having any kind of impact on Harper in any way really means a lot to me.

##### [00:22:22.990] - Brian Shelton

That's great. I try to ask everybody as kind of the last question of the show because I think it's so important to have this institutional knowledge base and this experience that you have. What advice do you have for current Harper students or for somebody who's thinking about coming to Harper?

##### [00:22:40.270] - Tom Schnecke

Well, first of all, for someone who's already a student, be really firm on what it is you think you want to pursue. Harper makes it so easy to change direction, but don't go in without a plan to really pick where you think you want to get and change mid course if you need to. That's been my whole life. I was at a radio station where the format changed and then they sold it. And then I unceremoniously found myself in a TV station, which made my jump from NBC to CBS much easier because I realized you could make a change, and it could be better. It could be different. But without having those experiences might not have made the leap. And so I think that's for if you're already there, if you're thinking about it again, it goes back to what is it you think you want to do? And how do you think Harper can help you? And if you're not sure, there are certainly people there who can guide you once you get that in your thought process.

##### [00:23:42.150] - Brian Shelton

That's great. Hey, Tom, you sent me a bunch of audio clips from the 1970s, and I'm going to include some of those in this podcast here. But do you want to say anything about any of the stuff you sent?

##### [00:23:55.100] - Tom Schnecke

I would like to think that is a highly produced, edited piece of Harper timeline. Now, there was a joke back in the day when you were a disk jockey, you recorded your shows and you played it for people. And so I've got probably a dozen audio cassette tapes of actual audio of Harper, and it was really a time capsule what was going on in the world, what was going on in Palatine, what was going on on campus, and it really sets the scene with the music and the tenor of what we were doing. And it's a slice of WHCM to show what has gone before and hadn't heard any of that in 20 years, and then found myself taking that material uploading it to Adobe Premiere and watching it all go again with new technology. And I thought uploading and digitizing an audio cassette from Harper to Adobe Premiere. Is everything in a nutshell right there? That's everything you need to know that's the old technology meets the new talking about what was and what will be.

##### [00:25:00.260] - Brian Shelton

Yeah, it's absolutely fantastic how you were able to do that. I've got bins of reels and cassettes that I've got to transfer myself. It's one of my winter projects.

##### [00:25:08.260] - Tom Schnecke

So like I said, not to sell, but things are in a certain order for a reason. And I think it's a fun way to just close your eyes and go, wow, that was Harper, or you might go, wow, that was Harper. But it's something that I'm really proud of. I have some great friends to this day kept in touch with who went on to CNN from Harper, to WGN, who are still working there, who are part of WHCM. And we're all part of what you've heard on that tape. And I think I'm hoping everyone gets a kick out of hearing what was Harper in 1978, 79.

##### [00:25:49.610] - Brian Shelton

I'm sure everybody's going to enjoy it. I'm going to include a bunch of it in the show. Tom, thank you so much for being on the show. But more importantly, thank you so much for being the kind of person who always puts Harper into people's minds, who always thinks about Harper and who always gives back to the institution. I've really appreciated getting to know you over the last few years and appreciate your support and your ongoing support of WHCM.

##### [00:26:15.070] - Tom Schnecke

Well, thank you. And I just want to say you do a terrific job with Harper. I am so excited you can ask my family. There is an 88.3 button on my car radio, and when I hit Arlington Heights Road, I'm on it. Seeing WHCM come up on the radio display. After all I've been through really gets the heart working.

##### [00:26:36.920] - Brian Shelton

And I want you to know that whenever I'm out of town, as soon as I get into broadcast range, I click the button to turn it on to make sure the transmitters are on.

##### [00:26:45.470] - Tom Schnecke

And I do understand that you can stream it and all that now. And we're all doing streaming, but I do get a kick out of actually seeing WHCM on a terrestrial radio display.

##### [00:26:55.850] - Brian Shelton

That's the way to go. Thanks so much for being here, Tom.

##### [00:26:58.950] - Tom Schnecke

Thank you.

##### [00:27:03.150] - WHCM Archival

Taking your requests right now on extension two, three, seven. Just a reminder. Are you interested in running this place next year? While WHCM is taking applications for the position of station manager and program director for the year 1979- 80 WHCM

##### [00:27:21.100] - WHCM Archival

It's 2:14 Thursday afternoon, the last day before spring break here at Harper College Sunshiny and 72 degrees outside and get that special feeling when 20,000 people help walk out birth defects during the March of Dime SuperWalk weekend, May 5, May 6.

##### [00:27:42.850] - Brian Shelton

Tom Schnecke is a graduate of Harper College and a 2009 Distinguished Alumni. If you're enjoying Harper Talks, please subscribe and while you're at it rate and review us so that others might find us, Harper Talks is a coproduction of Harper College Alumni Relations and Harper Radio. Our show is produced by Shannon Hynes. Our technical producer is Erik Bonilla Sanchez. This episode was edited by Brian Diaz. Our online content producer is Ashley Rosenthal. Our theme music was created by Aidan Cashman. I'm Brian Shelton. Thanks for listening. Thanks.