

The Community Page

The Value of Voice

If you've been in Idaho Falls for long, you've either heard, or heard of, Mel Richardson.

Mel and his wife, Dixie, came up from Utah in 1957. "It's true I'm not a native," says Mel, "but I got here as soon as I could." Local radio listeners then got their first exposure to what would soon become the baritone voice behind everything from regional sporting events and television commercials to graduation ceremonies and political forums.

If there is one thing Mel Richardson has, it's a public voice—and it is the one thing he hates most to have to trade in for a rocking chair.

You can't keep a good man down

Those who remember his first retirement from the Idaho State Senate may smile at the idea of Mel Richardson giving up the plow. His peers in the legislature threw a farewell party for him in the capital rotunda. But Mel later decided to run again, and ended up coming back the next year for another term.

After 60 years on the air, though, Mel signed off from daily broadcasting last week. For his fans, it was a bittersweet moment—hearing his trademark tagline for what may be the last time: "Good night and good luck to good (sports) folks everywhere."

Now what?

He's at work on a book. Not his memoirs, as you might expect, but a project his grandchildren have lobbied for incessantly. Mel is writing about the adventures of an old grizzly bear who turns up in the most unlikely places, and whose exploits have expanded with every new bedtime story the kids can wrangle out of their grandpa. In true Mel fashion, he found out what the people wanted and he's doing his best to deliver. That's Mel.



Mel and his wife, Dixie.

Politics—but not "as usual"

His political ambitions began in the 1960s. Mel and two friends polled the citizens of Ammon to see what residents felt were the biggest needs in the city. They came up with a list of ten critical items—things like a sewer system, a fire department and a public swimming pool. The threesome (Mel, Roy Southwick, and Leo Heer) looked over the results, then decided Mel should run for mayor and the other two shoot for city council—all three were elected.

Four fun-packed and hardworking years later, Mel's team had tackled every project on the list—and the swimming pool project gained the city McCowin Park to boot.

Mel had discovered something important: his voice was valuable, not just over the air, but in getting results on civic issues as well. His passion in that arena attracted attention statewide, and he was urged to run for United States Congress. He did so in 1986, winning the Republican Primary, but coming up short on votes against the Democratic incumbent in the general election.



Mel on choosing the right career:

"Pick something you would really enjoy. I loved every phase of broadcasting—I even enjoyed sweeping the floors."

Dixie on traveling with Mel:

"I love to travel with him, although he can slow you down. He is interested in everything—from what kind of tree that is, to what are the local politics, to what is the history of this area—and he talks with everyone. Anyone who is with Mel learns something."

In the final analysis, though, maybe Eastern Idaho just got lucky. Mel was soon elected to the Idaho State Legislature, where he served for 20 years. And though he was frequently offered broadcasting jobs in larger markets, even with professional baseball, he turned them all down in order to raise his children here in Idaho Falls and continue his work with the Senate.

Ask him about the biggest problem our country faces today, and he's quick to respond: "Saving America—we are losing our country."

Well, did he or didn't he?

At 83 years old, the word is that Mel Richardson has retired for good this time. But, has he?

The next time you see Mel, tell him you "have an idea he may find of interest." Tell him, for instance, that the honors journalism class at White Pine Charter School has been discussing the idea of "student voice." Tell him the kids are wondering how they can have a say in their future and in school policy... then watch Mel's eyes light up.

Mel Richardson still has a strong voice to share. Couple that with his love for education and a mind that is always thinking—and something great could happen next. Students of all ages, should prepare to be challenged and motivated by a guy who truly has "been there and done that."

Some highlights of Mel's political career:

- Forming LIFT (Legislative Initiative For Technology), a movement to encourage the use of technology in education. Mel went on to serve as chairman of the Idaho Council for Technology in Learning.
- Sponsoring legislation to preserve the sanctity of marriage by defining the term as occurring "between one man and one woman."
- Championing Castle Doctrine for the state, preserving the right for citizens to defend their homes and families from intruders.
- Introducing the bill that declared English the official language for state business. "If you want to introduce a bill in Idaho," says Mel, "introduce it in English, so the people can understand."

A very short list of Mel's results

There's not enough room on this page to list Mel's accomplishments.

- He hosted several television programs. ("We were '30 Minutes' before CBS was '60 Minutes,'" says Mel.) He reported on public affairs and was Promotion Director for KID TV.
- He worked with his sons, Mark and Lance, to host the nationally acclaimed radio talk show, "Probing America." Mark still broadcasts the show on Newstalk 690/1260, Idaho Falls-Pocatello.
- He developed and launched Scholastic Tournament, a competitive academic program for students. That work is still intact (sponsored now by Idaho National Laboratory). It sends Idaho champions to the National Science Bowl in Washington, D.C. every May. Why would a sportscaster care so deeply about education? "Not every kid is interested in football," says Mel.
- He is on every citizenship and politics "Who's Who" list you can find, he coached Little League for over 20 years, served as State Director for the Heisman Trophy, received the National Service Award from the Washington Time Foundation, the Distinguished Service Award from the Idaho Association of School Administrators, received the Silver Beaver and the Award of Merit from the Boy Scouts of America for his many years of work in that organization, served as Director of the Idaho Association of Cities and was a member of Idaho's 2002 Olympic Winter Games Executive Committee.