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Interview with Dave Congalton

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Dave Congalton

INTERVIEW WITH DAVE CONGALTON

KVEC News Talk Radio Host

Dave Congalton left the college classroom 20 years ago to follow his creative voice. Since then, he has been a newspaper columnist, award-winning author, radio talk show host, and most recently, a Hollywood screenwriter. The Central Coast knows him best as the host of “Hometown Radio,” heard weekday afternoons from 3 to 7 on KVEC 920AM.

Moebius: Dave, you came to California in 1987 to teach at Cal Poly. Isn't that what brought you to the Central Coast?

DC: Yes. I was an instructor at the University of Tulsa. I wanted to move to California to try something creative. I had never heard of Cal Poly or San Luis Obispo, and it was a one-year non-renewable teaching position. And so I came out to Cal Poly and spent a year teaching in the Speech Department. Every now and then I still run into students who remember me, who remember Topper, my dog. It amazes me, 20 years later, how many remember those days in the classroom.

Moebius: It doesn't amaze me. There are many among us who have at one time or another fantasized about being a talk show host, of having their own radio show, of being a DJ. You've been in academia, authored books, and had a newspaper column. What made you choose to become a radio talk show host?

DC: I chose radio out of necessity. I was working part-time at The Telegram-Tribune in the fall of '91 and found myself in need of money. Betsey Nash was on in the mornings and they were looking for somebody in the afternoons. I had only done radio briefly in high school, but my wife Charlotte Alexander thought that it might be something that I could do. The job only paid \$12,000 a year, and I was the only person they could find willing to work for that much.

Moebius: Was there ever a certain figure in radio, a particular person who inspired you?

DC: Anyone who is serious about talk radio has to fall back to Edward R. Murrow and his three key principles of broadcast journalism: conscience, controversy, and point of view. I've tried to apply those principles to my show over the years.

Moebius: The Dave Congalton Show has always been popular. Your ratings are high. You're involved in the community. Local businesses do very well advertising on your

show. It's a win-win situation. Yet, with all of the buyouts and shakeups in radio on the Central Coast over the years, it seems to be the trend to replace local live broadcasting with previously taped syndicated programming. From your viewpoint, what's the logic in this?.

DC: It's all about the money. These are strictly business decisions, or economic decisions. Management can't afford to staff a station with live programming 24/7. What matters now are the two drive-time periods.

Moebius: Drive-time periods?!

DC: For morning and late afternoon commuters. That's when you have local live shows. It doesn't really matter at 2 o'clock in the afternoon, in my opinion. Come to the station and I'll show you the program logs from 1938. You'll see that it's all national programming. It's not like national or syndicated programming is something new. We've done it before.

Moebius: What percentage of KVEC programming is live or homegrown?

DC: During the week, seven hours a day is local, with three hours for morning news and four hours 3 to 7 p.m. for my show. The rest is syndicated. That's the highest ratio of any radio station in the county. I don't know of anyone who is higher.

Moebius: Live programming is essential to KVEC. Your show enables people to voice their opinions on everything from local politics and government to health issues and finance. It's democracy in its purist form. I read in The Tribune that King Harris' morning local news show was reinstated after thousands in the community protested Laura Ingraham's syndicated talk show taking its place. Can you say something about how listeners and callers have influenced and even changed station decisioning?

DC: The King Harris episode clearly illustrates the impact that listeners have on programming. There was no way KVEC listeners were going to let the new owners not have local programming in the morning. As somebody said, "This would have been the first time in about 50 years that we didn't have local news." You can only push the listener so far in one direction. You can make changes and they may not like it, but they'll put up with it. In this case, the new owners pushed too far. They misread the audience.

Moebius: KVEC celebrated its 70th birthday last year. KVEC has been on the air since 1937, when it played John Phillip Sousa in the morning and swing in the evenings.

DC: You tell me. I wasn't there.

Moebius: I understand that in 1956, Bob Brown started one of the county's first radio talk shows, "Live Line."

DC: A lot of the KVEC documents were tossed out in the '80s by a former station owner. I don't have much of a sense of station history. It's pretty spotty.

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Moebius: And over the years, "Peterson...And...the News," the Dodgers and Cal Poly football have come and gone..."

DC: Peterson was at KVEC for one year.

Moebius: I read somewhere that he retired from KVEC in 1995.

DC: We fired Fred on his birthday. There's a thing about radio that people always get fired on their birthday, and Peterson was fired on his birthday. We didn't know that it was his birthday. We were on the front page of the Telegram-Tribune the next day because we fired Fred Peterson on his birthday. He was in his seventies.

Moebius: A lot has happened over the years. What do you think that the future holds for KVEC?

DC: That's the \$64,000 question isn't it? To tell you the truth, no one's really sure. The new owners, El Dorado Broadcasters, seem committed now to local radio. We had to educate them a bit, but now they seem to be on board, understanding the value of local news and local talk. The next big thing on the horizon is High-Definition Radio. The question is how small stations like KVEC will adapt. With High-Definition Radio, you can take the signal at 920 and divide it into four different sub-signals. Channel number one will be broadcasting what's on the air, what you're listening to right now, and channel number two will be the station programming from the day before. So, if you missed the show, you will be able to turn to channel two and replay the show from the previous day. But who knows the future? Radio is very unpredictable.

Moebius: Will being AM or FM have anything to do with it?

DC: No. There's satellite radio, the Internet, and a lot of people are now listening solely to stations on the Internet. Who knows where radio's going to be in five years. I have no idea. I just hope I still have a job.

Moebius: I think that local radio's essential to the community.

DC: The kids coming up, the 20, 25 year olds, aren't reading newspapers, and the day will come when they're not listening to radio. They're listening to their computers. And that's the generation that's going to determine the future of radio. Not someone in their sixties, such as yourself.

Moebius: You have a lot to share with an audience. Have you ever considered having a national syndicated radio talk show yourself?

DC: The short answer is no. Nationally syndicated radio favors those who lean right politically: conservative talk radio. I don't have that political leaning. What I excel in, what I do well, is hometown radio focusing on the community. Obviously, that wouldn't translate to a national market. And I just don't have the fire in my belly to go out and try it. I don't have a burning passion to be a national host. I'm perfectly content. I have

the best job in the county. Other people make more money, but nobody has a better job than I do.

Moebius: Talking about storm and stress, I remember many a winter storm when I lit the candles, shivering and wet, scrounging for batteries, and tuned to KVEC for the latest storm information. You and other KVEC announcers and staff have always been there during storms, fires and other emergencies providing updates. What's the rationale of there being no one live and local in the studio when information and communications are most needed? It's a relief finding you there at 920 AM when everything else is down.

DC: There's no set policy. It depends upon the gravity of the situation. If there's an earthquake, if there's a fire, if there's a power outage, it's up to the news director to decide if he or she will come in on weekends or nights. We stayed late on the night of the San Simeon Earthquake. It varies case to case. During the Highway 41 Fire in '94 we did nothing but report on the fire for a whole week. For the first couple of days, we were the only source of information about the fire because of our transmitter located at Cal Poly. All of the other transmitters had been knocked out by the fire.

Moebius: I've always loved radio. Excuse my self-indulgence, but I remember the late '40s and early '50s when most people didn't own a television set. My family listened to shows like The Whistler and The Jack Benny Show. I liked The Lone Ranger and Sky King. Dave, are there words to describe what it's like being in radio at the turn of the twenty-first century? Radio has gone through a lot of changes...

DC: The fundamental thing about radio hasn't changed. Radio at its heart remains one person talking to many, one communicating with many. And you all have your favorite personalities, whether it's Jack Benny, Wolfman Jack, Captain Buffoon, or Dave Congalton. It's a personality driven business.

Moebius: Might that not be a reason radio will survive? Radio has survived television.

DC: Yeah, but the computer is the bigger threat. You couldn't listen to radio on your television. You can listen to radio on your computer. People now have radio stations on the Internet. People broadcast over the computer. They're taking the principle of radio and extracting it through the computer. So, I don't know.

Moebius: While the new KVEC owners, El Dorado Broadcasters, have realized the importance of local news broadcasting for the community, what do you think the future holds for local programming in general?

DC: I will try to be the optimist and hope that "the powers that be" realize that the only way radio can compete with iPods and music downloads etc., is to offer local programming. The more local we stay, the better chance we have to survive.

Moebius: So, tell us some more about yourself. I used to read your "Topper" column

at the Telegram-Tribune. Why didn't you stay at the Tribune?

DC: I'm glad that I had the time at the Tribune because it taught me how to write on deadline. That was a great experience. Anyone who is a writer should spend time at a newspaper. I'm grateful for that opportunity. But, I thought newspaper work was boring. Go cover the courts! Go cover the supes! How boring can you get? I enjoyed writing a column because you have more creative say about your voice and topic. The best gig in journalism is to have your own column.

Moebius: You've been in radio a long time.

DC: I've been doing the radio show for 16-1/2 years now. It's a great job where I call the shots. It's my show. It's kind of like teaching again. I prep a four-hour show, but instead of interacting with students, I interact with callers. There are no tests, no grading. It's all good.

Moebius: And news talk radio is essential to the democratic process, a direct voice on the air.

DC: Call in and you have a 99 percent chance of getting on.

Moebius: Last topic. I understand that you've written a screenplay.

DC: We could probably do a whole interview just on this. I originally came out to California in 1987 to pursue screenwriting. It didn't work out for me and I gave up. Back in 2005, I decided to try again and wrote two scripts back-to-back. The first one, "Scribble" is set to go into production in May with Richard Kind and Eric Roberts in starring roles. Of course, it could end up being delayed again, but we're getting closer. The story deals with unpublished novelists in Los Angeles pursuing their dreams. It's pretty exciting and it's only taken me 21 years to make it happen. ☺

Interview on behalf of Moebius conducted by Ken Kenyon, Winter 2008.