

'On the air'

Your KOOL more Music power station!

Monte teens build own FM station

By Tom Cherveney
Staff Writer

Montevideo's newest radio station offers music you can sing along to, up-to-the-minute weather reports, live coverage of Thunder Hawk sporting events, and always, the unpredictable.

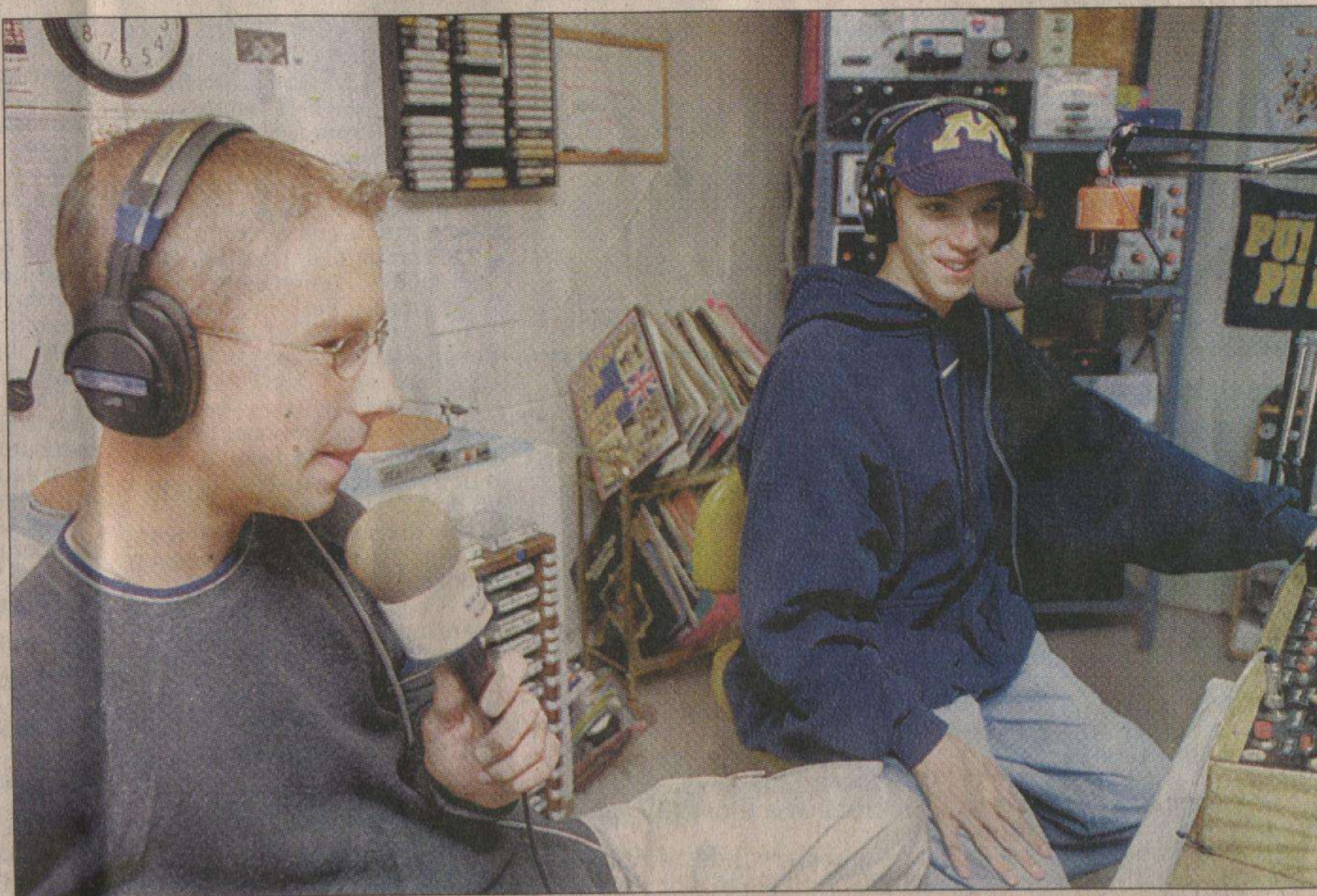
Tune in some days, and you'll hear deejays Jake Niemand, 16, and Josiah Christoffer, 15, parody WCCO Radio's "Midday Minnesota" program with their own version, "Midday Mess." Or, wait till a dark, Friday the 13th, and listen as the two deep-toned announcers host their own Transylvania Blood Drive.

Hey, it's all in fun, and why shouldn't it be? That's why the two high school sophomores created, own and operate their non-commercial FM radio station, KRAM.

Look for it at 98.3 on the FM dial, but only when you're in Montevideo.

KRAM broadcasts with all of one watt of power from a 37-foot tall tower in the backyard of Niemand's home just outside of Montevideo.

KRAM/ Please see A12



Josiah Christoffer (foreground) and Jake Niemand are the owners, operators, and creators of KRAM Radio, a low power FM radio station in Montevideo. The two started out broadcasting on a CB band in a granary, but now operate at 98.3 on the FM dial from a studio they built in the basement of Jake's parent's home.

Tribune photo by Tom Cherveney

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Kram

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It gives the radio station about a one-mile broadcast range, said Niemand. That's good enough to reach about 5,000 pairs of ears in the community.

Even the ears in Lake Wobegone never heard radio quite like this.

When hundreds of bicyclists descended on the community for The Ride Across Minnesota (TRAM) last summer, Niemand hopped on his bike with microphone in hand to do live interviews. The weighty equipment toppled him over, but the dedicated deejay never missed a beat.

"If something goes wrong, we just laugh about it," said Niemand, as he quickly popped a new cassette into the station's console as something did go wrong: The brand new CD player quit.

To hear them tell it, they pretty much wired all of their equipment together with this devil-may-care attitude. "I just learn when I get shocked," laughed Niemand, when asked how they ever figured out how to assemble the station's sophisticated electronic gadgetry. It keeps them on the air 12 to 14 hours a day, seven days a week.

Truth be told, the KRAM studio that replaced Niemand's tables of Legos in the basement of his parents' home is better equipped than some commercial operations.

The young station founders salvaged thousands of dollars worth of equipment destined for the junk pile when a neighboring commercial station switched to an automated format.

They scrounged up the rest of their equipment in similar fashion. Praise FM in Osakis donated an electronic weather station to the two after they volunteered to clean up the station's facility.

Business owners in Montevideo recently donated funds to help the two purchase

"If something goes wrong, we just laugh about it."

a high-powered computer. It allows them to pre-program a full day's worth of air time. It keeps the music and their voices on the air while they are at their desks in high school classes.

The two also invested about \$2,000 of the funds they earned doing odd jobs to buy the gear they needed. (They're on a first name basis with Dan Adams at the Radio Shack in Willmar.)

All in all, it puts them a long ways from where they started 2½ years ago. That's when their venture into broadcasting began in a dusty, second floor granary on Christoffer's home place.

Initially, the two had toyed with the idea of broadcasting with a wireless FM microphone.

Montevideo science teacher Jim Gilley had a better idea. He helped them set up a CB radio system.

Soon, the two, eighth-grade deejays had truck drivers calling them over their own CBs, requesting songs.

The ambitious deejays took to the road, too. They broadcast their first high school basketball game wondering whether their signal could be heard outside the gymnasium.

Those worries ended in July 1998 when the two erected their FM antenna and made 98.3 on the FM dial the official home for Kool Radio And Music, or KRAM.

Diana Ross and the Supremes, the Dixie Chicks, 'N Sync, Garth Brooks and Sonya Tucker offer a sampling of the variety of music they play.

"That's the thing we really like about it," said Christoffer. "You get bored if you play the same thing."

Don't worry. Their play list already includes 1,700 songs, and it's growing.

"Your KOOL more Music power station" is how they promote it.

In true KRAM fashion, their music comes in every mode

possible. Their music is kept on radio carts, cassettes, CDs, reel-to-reel tape, phonograph albums and 45s, eight-track recordings, and on wave file in that fancy new computer.

To manage it all, they use a studio console that looks like it came straight from the space shuttle.

A local radio engineer helped them put it all together. He helped set them up with the red-and-white broadcast antenna in the backyard, too.

This is strictly a non-commercial venture, and definitely a legal one.

As long as they restrict their broadcast oomph to no more than 250 microvolts per meter, as measured three meters from their antenna, they do not need an FCC license, said the station owners.

They'd like a license nonetheless: They are actively encouraging the passage of proposed legislation that would allow for the licensing of low-powered stations such as KRAM.

With a license, they might be able to boost their output to 100 watts. "With 100 watts we could reach Clara City," explained Niemand.

Guaranteed, they'd have listeners in Clara City. While they have no way of knowing how many listen to them in Montevideo, they don't have to

look far to get feedback.

Their classmates at the Montevideo High School often give them compliments on their selection of songs and the live sports coverage they provide.

The only hard part, they said, is when their classmates complain about the station "fuzzing out" when they drive outside their broadcast range.

Meanwhile, the two are having too much fun to worry about the many hours it takes them to make this all possible.

Their parents — Carl and Pat Niemand and Kerry and Lyn Christoffer — fully support this venture, and well they should.

Just before they started the radio station, these two amateur weather buffs were looking at putting together their own Tote-able Tornado Observatory, just like the one they saw in the movie "Twister."

They might have pursued this project further, but they realized it would never keep them busy enough.

"Do you know how many tornadoes there are in Chippewa County?" asked Niemand. "There was only one in the last 50 years," he answered with obvious disappointment.

Good thing for us, too. Tune in to 98.3 or check out their web site at www.listen.to/kramradio to find out why.



Tribune photo by Tom Cherveney

Josiah Christoffer (left) and Jake Niemand know how to promote their low-power FM radio station, KRAM. Theirs is the first advertisement to appear on the marquee of the Hollywood Theater in downtown Montevideo for many years.