

# Kool Radio And Music 96.7

## Montevideo's low-power FM station has high-powered goals

By Tom Cherveney

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MONTEVIDEO — There are those who believe that radio's future can be heard in corporate board rooms high above big city streets, or even deciphered from the signals beamed from satellites in outer space.

There are others in Montevideo who believe that a better future for radio is being trail blazed in a ground floor studio on the south end of Main Street. That's where the studio for KRAM-FM can be found broadcasting with all of 100 watts of power.

That's enough power to light a room, or to send a clear, stereo signal to listeners in a 15 to 18 miles radius of this rural Minnesota community.

KRAM's signal at 96.7 on the FM dial would go farther, said Jake Niemand, if he could find the funds to double the size of his 50-foot broadcast tower in the backyard of his parent's home in Montevideo.

He also hopes to expand KRAM Radio's reach by someday streaming its content over the Internet. The station is very close to achieving that goal, he said.

KRAM Radio operates as a noncommercial station, supported by donations from local sponsors that include a long-list of Montevideo businesses.

Niemand, age 23, is not looking to create the next Clear Channel radio empire, and that's exactly the point. Since he and his friend Josiah Christoffer started their low power venture as high school students, it's been all about returning a local voice to radio.

"Radio is much more special than a sales office that happens to play



Tribune photo by Tom Cherveney

**Jake Niemand, co-founder of KRAM-FM radio in Montevideo, hopes other young people in the area will continue to operate the low-power, nonprofit community radio station.**

music," said Niemand.

Too much of today's radio is filled with cookie cutter formats, he complains. Stations adopt country, oldies, adult contemporary or classic rock music formats because it's easy to find advertisers for their respective audiences, he said.

KRAM plays music of its own choosing, or as Niemand explained it: "Decided by the ear." He said the radio industry would

describe the station's format as an "adult album alternative."

The play list covers a wide range of music, from classics by Tom Petty and Santana to the sounds of Vanessa Carlton, the Wallflowers, Weezer, or Coldplay and Natalie Imbruglia.

In other words, there are classic tunes that everyone older than 30 knows, and music that only those under 30 has ever heard. As a

result, the station's audience covers a wide range of ages and demographics.

No one knows this better than Julie Jones, who plays KRAM all day long at Susie's Hair Company. She said her customers are from a wide range of ages and backgrounds, but just about all of them make a point of telling her how much they enjoy the music.

Jones said she likes hearing the classics, but also appreciates the exposure to new music.

There's something else she likes too: "You don't hear the same songs over and over," she said.

Niemand and Christoffer started what is now Thunderhawk Broadcasting in June, 1997 in a grain room of a barn. The two high school students used donated equipment and the expertise offered by their seventh grade science teacher, Jim Gilley.

Their simple operation broadcast with a miniscule amount of power — about as much needed to run a wrist watch, said Niemand. Soon, the two were providing live coverage of Montevideo High School sporting events, playing music, and having the time of their lives.

Niemand said the experience of creating a radio station from the ground floor up provided an education in everything from engineering to small town politics.

The engineering was as dangerous as the politics. He remembers one time when he was inside the station's transmitter as it tried to start up. "There were lots of sparks, and Jake made a trip to the Radio Shack store for replacement parts," he laughed while recalling the event.

Today, KRAM Radio is

housed in a soundproof studio in space provided by Clean Up our River Environment at 114 South First Street. It is licensed with the Federal Communications Commission as a low power FM station.

Low power FM is reserved for noncommercial entities. Its purpose is to provide a voice to organizations and community groups, said Niemand.

The trend towards consolidation in the radio industry has meant fewer voices and choices on the radio dial, he said. Many stations rely on satellite feeds and provide very little local or original programming, he noted.

Niemand said he would love to see radio return to its roots, when it provided a voice for a community and offered original programming that people actually paid attention to. Low power FM is an opportunity for those with innovative and community-oriented goals to find their space on the airwaves, he explained.

Niemand is still assisted in this venture by his longtime friend and station co-founder Christoffer, but both young men can only offer so much time. Christoffer lives in Sioux Falls, S.D., where he is employed.

Niemand will return to St. Thomas University in the Twin Cities this fall. He has completed four years of study and is in the seminary with intentions of becoming a Catholic priest.

He is devoting his summer to introducing young people in the Montevideo community to KRAM Radio and giving them on the air roles.

His goal is to see KRAM Radio operated full time by young people in the area as a local, grassroots voice for the community.

## BUSINESS BRIEFS

### Rueckert joins Lake Region Bank

WILLMAR — Kevin Rueckert has joined Lake Region Bank in Willmar as vice president for commercial lending.

He will be responsible for generating new business relationships as well as working with existing business clients of the bank.

Rueckert has a decade of banking experience and most recently was a commercial banking executive at another bank in Willmar. He earned a bachelors degree in finance and business from Mankato State University.

Rueckert and his family are 16-year residents of Willmar.



Rueckert

### Affordable Electric Services opens in Willmar

WILLMAR — Chad Bastin has opened Affordable Electric Services at 225 Benson Ave. S.E. in Willmar.

He is a graduate of Minnesota West Community and Technical College and has 21

years experience, the last 14 with Freetly Electric in Kerkhoven.

He will do residential, commercial, remodeling, agricultural, hot tubs and swimming pools, service change outs, service work, underground repairs and trenching.



Bastin