

Behind the Scenes with Joan Isabella

Producing WJR's Albom in the Afternoon is not just a job to Joan Isabella. It's her life.

BY ELLEN PILIGIAN



Isabella is like the mom of the show, which includes, left to right, intern Rick Miller, engineer Michael Conrad, Rachel Nevada, Mitch Albom, Ken Brown and intern Caroline Kern.

says. But her biggest thrill, she says, is to see the show's host, Mitch Albom, and co-hosts, Ken Brown and Rachel Nevada, get recognition. "When that happens, I get plenty of credit."

The show, which debuted in January 1996, has been part of WJR's efforts to attract younger listeners and improve ratings in that time slot, previously held by the Afternoon News Center. So far it's succeeded in doing that. According to the fall 1996 ratings book, the show, whose target audience is adults age 35-54, was fourth in its time slot with adults age 25-54, and first with men in that same age group.

Apparently, Albom made the right choice when he told WJR he wanted to pick his own producer. He knew Isabella could help him do the show he'd envisioned: a pop culture radio equivalent of the local pub or water cooler where you meet the same friends every day; sometimes famous people drop by and sometimes you just talk about what happened in your day. "I didn't have anyone else in mind," he says. "She had the ingredients I wanted."

Today, it seems, Isabella—a tenacious worker, peacemaker, even sometime mother to the crew—couldn't be happier. It's not an easy job, she admits, but it sure is fun.

When Joan Isabella was in Philadelphia at CBS News Talk station WCAU-AM, she got her big break—a chance to be on the air. At the time, Isabella, then in her mid-20s, was executive producer, responsible for scheduling guests, supervising hosts and hiring and training a staff of producers. She also trained people to fill in when hosts were on vacation.

One day, her boss, figuring if Isabella could train someone to host a show, she could do it herself, said, "Why don't you just do it?" As Isabella recalls the experience: "When the red light went on I had nothing to say. I was completely mortified. I could teach anybody how to do it but to do it myself was completely overwhelming. My father had to

call in." She laughs. "It's not what I do. I'm a producer."

These days Isabella is happily behind the scenes as producer of "Albom in the Afternoon," which airs weekdays on WJR from 4-6 p.m. And if she ever feels overlooked as a producer, it doesn't show. It's enough knowing that she's appreciated by the people around her, she

Isabella, who's usually in by 10 a.m., works on the 21st floor of the Fisher Building in Detroit along with Albom, Brown, Nevada and a steady stream of interns. Her desk is covered with press releases, books, industry publications, an over-stuffed Rolodex, and a box (filled with scraps of paper) labeled: "Scraps of Paper to Become a Rolodex."



Behind her, a set of shelves holds everything from books and CDs (many from the local bands she books to play on the show each day) to a half-empty bag of Pepperidge Farms Goldfish crackers. Stacks of newspapers are piled on the floor; nearby file drawers are crammed with more CDs and a library of tapes of the show.

She doesn't even have to leave her chair to use the fax machine/copier to her right. And despite having three phone lines, Isabella is still hard to reach. When she gets home, often as late as 7:30, she doesn't even want to *look* at the phone.

It's little wonder she says it takes half her day just to go through all the stuff demanding her attention. "It's very, very difficult to stay organized," says Isabella, who gets 50 pieces of mail and 50 phone calls a day. It's the one thing she wishes she could change about her job—that it would take less time to get everything done.

Only part of her day is spent behind her desk, however. Most of the time she's literally running around or up and down the stairs between the studio and her office. "That's why I wear these sneakers,"

she says of her off-white walking shoes. "I run down those stairs sometimes 70 times a day." That the shoes don't necessarily match her outfit doesn't bother Isabella, 37, who wears little makeup and insists on wash-and-wear hair. In fact, she's

"Who Knows Mom Best," a take-off on the Newlywed Game, know what to do once inside the studio. She sounds like a drill sergeant as she rounds them up in the lobby and tells them they must speak up, they can't just nod when they get in front of the microphone. "This is radio," she yells. "You *must* answer the question!"

She rushes back to the control room. "It's a crazy day," she says with a hint of excitement. "We're taping one thing, we're running another and I've got these eight people standing in the hall."

What they're taping is a phone interview with Chicago Bull Dennis Rodman and his ex-wife Anicka. Apparently, it's quite a coup that she got the duo on together. The only reason she didn't try to do it live is because she didn't trust either of them to come through, she says. As it was, Rodman hung up once (thankfully he called back); and Anicka phoned in on a cellular phone. At one point, Isabella's boss, WJR president Mike Fezzey, walks in during the phone interview. "Oh, this is pretty good stuff," he says to no one in particular, then tells Isabella, "You're really good at your job."



Isabella, in these photos, running the show one day when they have to use an alternate studio. It's crazy, but she finds time to smile.

pridefully low-maintenance. She's got more important things on her mind.

Take their Mother's Day show, for instance. Isabella is busy making sure the participants who've come to play

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Isabella herself is still reeling from her coup. "Oh my god! I can't believe I actually pulled this off!" she says. "The miracle is that no one has been able to get them on together." Later, even

the network, ABC, calls to say they want to air part of the interview.

To an outsider, the whole scene is confusing. The Rodman interview is coming through over one set of the speakers while another blares a taped segment that the engineer is playing for the listeners. (The show is not always 100% live.) Meanwhile, for Isabella—who's also juggling phone calls, scrawling notes, E-Mailing messages to Albom in the studio and directing the interns—it's just another tension-filled day.

"The show is an adrenaline rush," she later admits, adding, "If I don't feel that kind of stress I don't know that I feel fulfilled. I believe so much in this program that I want it to be as good as it can be. And when anything goes wrong or when it's not up to snuff, that's stressful to me." It's why she loves her job. "Challenge creates the stress, and there's always a new challenge."

The show can take as much out of her as it gives, too. "There are times when the weekend can't come soon enough," she says. "I put so much energy and so much of myself into what I do that I go home and I'm spent. I can't make decisions, I don't want to think

Sound Bites

First job: Slicing onions at a Hoagie shop at age 14.

What bugs you most in others? Sloth.

What bugs you most in yourself?

That I'm not better than I am, and that I'm not better to myself.

Qualities you most admire? Brilliance, strength, kindness. People who I perceive to be able to do a whole lot more than I'm able to do.

Biggest headache of your job? Overload of everything.

Advice to would-be producers?

Work your butt off. It's not glamorous. It's hard work. Don't do it unless you can taste it.

If you changed professions: I'd be a potter. It's the only thing I ever did that while I was doing it I thought of nothing else. It completely cleared my mind.

Dream guests on the show: The ultimate interview: live, in-studio, one hour with Paul McCartney. Also: Ringo Starr, Neil Young, Glenn Frey (on in May), Joni Mitchell.

about paying my bills. I've used every bit of mental energy I have."

Asked how she and Albom share responsibility for the show, Isabella says, "It's his show, there's no doubt about it. He's the bottom line. But I do a lot to make it all happen." Isabella—who's quick to note that she also gets help from Brown, Nevada and the interns—has myriad duties, including coordinating everyone's activities and listening to their concerns; reprimanding people when they're out of line; encouraging them when they need it; making travel arrangements and booking out-of-town studios; scripting the show's line-up; screening phone calls; booking guests and keeping track of who's been on and what they've said.

And despite a track record of guests that includes Joan Rivers, Joe Dumars, Gladys Knight, Jonnie Cochran and Ross Perot, Isabella says it's always a challenge to book the next guest. "For every person that I get on the show I've tried for 20 or 30 people."

Meanwhile, easy-to-book guests—who have something to push—"aren't the ones we really want," she says. Still,

"When someone calls from XYZ Pharmaceuticals with a new drug, I really look at it and say, 'What is this?' I read everything. I don't want to miss something good."

"My goal is to not let people turn off the radio. I want them to either be laughing or crying."

Mostly, they book people they go after, she says, adding that what's key for her is that the subject be compelling. "My goal is to not let people turn off the radio. I want them to either be laughing or crying," she says. "The biggest thing for me is the radio is your friend. And I want to be a good friend."

Comparing her work now to when she was programming manager at Detroit's WXYT NewsTalk Radio, from 1989-91, where she trained talent and managed a staff of more than 30, she says, "This is a lot more personal. It's

not a job. It's our life."

In fact, they're like family. Isabella says Albom is like the stern dad while she's like the mom who says, "Okay, everybody, you have to do this." They're affectionate, too. One day, Brown tackles Isabella as she runs past him on stairs and gives her a cuddly bear hug. She, Albom, Nevada and Brown even spent a weekend together in New York City earlier this year just for fun. Plus, they travel so much for the show they *have* to get along. Last summer they went to Wimbledon then Atlanta for the Olympics. They were away seven out of 10 weeks, she says. "By the end of the summer we were so exhausted we were completely spent."

Like family, they have fights, too. But they're always about the show, says Isabella, who hates misunderstandings and is often the one to smooth things over when things get tense. Still, "I can be a bitch," she says. "But I choose my spots, and I choose them carefully. What matters to me is the end result."

Working with Albom, she can't be a push-over. He's a fighter, she says. "I'll argue if I think I have a good idea and he

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“The show is an adrenaline rush,” says Isabella, here at her post, in the middle of it all, in the control room.

doesn't agree.” Plus, Albom is so busy doing his sports column for the *Detroit Free Press* and hosting a sports show on WJR, among other things, he may not always know who's hot (he's seen “Seinfeld” twice, he says). So when he asks, “Why are we interviewing this guy? I've never heard of him,” it's Isabella's job to say, “Trust me, everyone else has.”

That's why Albom wanted Isabella as producer. “I knew she was tough and wasn't afraid of me,” he says. “I needed somebody who wasn't going to just say yes to me all the time.”

Perhaps that's something Isabella learned growing up. The youngest of four children, she was raised in Philadelphia by a “very driven” father, “a fighter,” she says, who started his own steel fabrication business the year she was born, and a mother who took her to the library each week. Despite her father's business success (“I never felt privileged although I guess I knew I was,” she says), he instilled in his children a strong work ethic. They were taught: don't judge people based on how much money they have, work hard and earn what you get.

At age 12, Isabella washed boats for 10 cents a foot at the marina where her family had a house boat. “You washed a 30-foot boat for like \$3,” she says with a laugh. “You'd think you were living. You could go and buy your own ice cream.”

She got into radio at Boston University, where she'd been considering law until she took a speech class taught by a popular Boston radio personality. “I really loved it,” she says. “I became very intrigued with radio.” She took more

classes, where she met her husband, Michael, now an account manager at WNIC-FM. At the time he was interning at a radio station. “All of his friends slept, breathed, drank and ate radio,” she recalls. “They'd have these big conversations about segues between songs. I could never say anything because I never knew what they were talking about.”

She graduated a communications/political science major in 1982. Her first job was as an associate producer with “The Jane Whitney Show” in Philadelphia. A year later, the show was cancelled and Isabella took a part-time job at a New Jersey radio station producing a sports show. It was her first experience with sexism. “No matter what I said—it could have been the most brilliant thing they ever heard—they didn't see me as a person,” she says of the men she worked with. “I was determined to make them respect me. I wasn't going to let any sexism stop me.”

Isabella learned about business at her next job, at Philadelphia's WCAU from 1983-89. Finding herself in a corporate environment, she says she realized she'd never thought past *getting* a career, or about *having* a career and climbing the ladder. She recalls how disappointed she felt when she didn't get a raise. After mustering the courage to tell her boss she needed and deserved more money, he replied, “Then find someone who's willing to pay you more.”

“It was the most horrible thing anyone ever said to me but it was the greatest thing anybody said to me,” says Isabella today. “I realized that nobody's going to give it to you. No one's just going to

hand it to you. You've got to fight for it.”

She met Albom after she and Michael got engaged in 1988. Albom, then doing sports at WLLZ-FM, where Michael was marketing director, gave the couple an engagement party. Later, when Albom was doing a sports show at that station, Isabella tagged along “as Michael's wife.” Then programming manager at WXYT, she'd give them tips on screening phones calls. “In the very beginning I knew more about talk [radio] than any of them did,” she says.

After a move to Channel 2 in January 1991 to be executive producer for “Dayna,” she went into business with publicist Marcy Hayes later that year. She did that, telecommuting with Hayes, through a move back to Philadelphia in 1994 for Michael's career. Then, in the summer of 1995, barely unpacked and into her new home, she got a call from Albom, asking, “What would it take to get you to come back?”

Today, Isabella, now barely into her new home in Farmington Hills, seems to have no regrets about coming back. Exuding a certain contentedness, she contemplates a name her friends call her: “Earth Mother.” She says it's because she likes to cook and do crafts. Perhaps it also has to do with a key thing in her life—creating an environment where people thrive. Surely it's another quality, another ingredient, Albom admired. “I want to make a difference in people's lives one minute at a time,” she says. “Growth is very important to me, and helping people grow. I want my house to be the house everybody wants to hang out in.”