

John Hancock's signature

Radio host celebrates Father's Day in March

By Erica Parkerson

Tuning in to WBT's "John Hancock Show" weekday evenings is like eavesdropping on a juicy conversation at a diner counter. Average Joes and Janes call in from 6 to 9 p.m. with their two cents' worth on the day's events/

WBT originally hired Hancock in 1990 to stir up the pot of talk radio. Politically, he leans right, but not hard. And he deplores dishonesty. At the time of his hire, talk radio was not very confrontational. Charlotteans had yet to hear Rush Limbaugh's voice. "Nobody was getting in anybody's face," said Hancock. So, nearly 15 years ago, he started going head-to-head with listeners. "I billed myself as Charlotte's most beloved, because I was so hated," Hancock said.

But one day in 1991, Hancock cried on the air and everything changed. Grins, Hancock's cat and sidekick for 8 years, had been diagnosed with cancer. Hancock's voice cracked when he shared the news. "That's when Charlotte said, 'I think he's a jerk but...he cried about his cat on the air. How big a nightmare can he be?'" said Hancock. Listeners who already responded – some vehemently – to his uncompromising honesty got a glimpse of a more personal Hancock through his willingness to be transparent.

Eventually, a deeper grief etched a place for the "John Hancock Show" forever in Charlotte: his father's death on March 16, 1994. "When your father's in a coma and the phone rings at 3:30 in the morning, you know what it is," said Hancock.

After receiving the news, he made airline reservations, smoked cigarettes and almost called a replacement for his show. "Your system immediately puts you in this purgatory, this great state of denial, and for some reason...I decided I would do my own show," said Hancock.

This show marked the signature day of his career. Listeners were aware that Hancock's father was ill, but only those closest to him suspected what had transpired. He opened the phone lines and invited callers to talk about their dads.

They did, for three straight hours. "It was all so honest," said Hancock. "Nobody was calling just to be on the radio. It was a chance to vent, maybe to put their dad up on a pedestal."

He says it was fascinating to hear macho-sounding guys talk about their dads. "All of a sudden there's a gap and you know that the Adam's apple has swelled up," said Hancock.

At the show's end, Hancock expressed with gratitude and grief, "Thanks for calling and telling me about your dads. I lost mine last night."

BECOMING A MAN

Hancock's father was a man of many talents: a land developer, architect, finance company owner, pilot, car salesman, drummer, artist and finally an ordained Episcopal priest.

"He was probably a lot like me," said Hancock. "I think he had hopes for bigger things out of his life, probably somewhat frustrated by the level he didn't reach. But to those of us who looked at him from our angle, he reached a level that I could only dream of."

Father and son had their moments of contention. "I was a late-'60s, early-'70s hippie, and he was a conservative Goldwater Republican," said Hancock. They fought heatedly about hair and bell-bottoms.

In his 20s, Hancock gravitated toward his father. He still misses their phone conversations. "When your dad dies, that's the last step to becoming a man," said Hancock. "For most of us, that's the one guy who will, without any ulterior motive, try to answer you honestly."

DO IT FOR YOURSELF

Hancock, now 52, became the father of two boys after falling in love with their mother, Susan. He met her while filming a commercial at WTVI, where she worked at the time. They were married on New Year's Eve 10 years ago. "Susan is perfect for me. She lets me be who I am," said Hancock.

Though he often refers to Susan's sons as "his kids" on the show, Hancock never means to detract from their biological father. Last year, Hancock received cards from the boys, now grown men, expressing their thankfulness for his role in their lives. "They let me know I did OK," Hancock said.

Over the years, his annual Father's Day show has suggested that listeners write that letter or make that phone call, regardless of the relationship status. Hancock believes in the importance of the effort for both father and child. "Acknowledge to him that you get it; that you appreciate the process he went through and everything he's done for you," he said.

Hancock saved hundreds of letters listeners sent as a result of the first Father's Day broadcast. Some are stained with tears of regret and others imply: I heard your show and I wrote that letter to my dad. He died last year and I just wanted to say thank you.

The volume of correspondence he received on a matter so personal to him made "Father's Day" a March tradition on the "John Hancock Show."

