KUNM’s ‘The Children’s Hour’ Not So Childish

BY KEIKO OHNUMA

Who is the most underserved, underrepresented group in American media today? Katie Stone would argue it’s children. Parents may roll their eyes — until they witness what happens on Saturday mornings at 9, when Stone corrals 12-16 kids into a studio at KUNM-FM 89.9 to broadcast “The Children’s Hour.”

“There’s nothing like what we’re doing anywhere in the U.S.,” Stone says of the live format that grew out of inheriting the long-running time slot in 2001. With 730 shows under her belt, she’s confident saying, “We are the only show I’m aware of that is live, with local kids, talking about local issues.”

The formula makes for a freewheeling, improvised, occasionally chaotic hour as Stone interviews people from the community, then opens it up for questions from her young co-hosts. “I get really frustrated when I hear research shows that children basically know what they want to do in life by age 10,” she says, “but how would a kid know if they weren’t exposed?”

For that reason, her guests — there might be one or two per show — talk about what they’re experts in. “It’s a little crazy,” says Kerry Jones, a National Weather Service meteorologist and regular guest. “Sometimes, randomly, kids will connect the topics. Last time I was on, there was also a woman from the Bio Park, and we were talking about the Butterfly Pavilion, so we got into a connection between wildlife and weather.”

Despite the often anarchic format, the kids’ questions, though random, are relevant. In talking about snow, for instance, the conversation turned to the hexagonality of snowflakes and why snow accumulates where it does. “One thing you learn is that it’s OK to admit that there are a few things we just don’t know,” Jones says.

The show discusses current events and can sometimes take on an edge. After Donald Trump signed an executive order banning travel to the United States by Muslims from Iraq and six other nations, Stone brought back Rahim AlHaj, an award-winning master oud player who fled Iraq in 1991 as a political refugee. Conversation turned to what it was like to be a refugee. Then AlHaj was asked if he had to leave behind pets. Yes, he said, he never found out what became of his beloved homing pigeons.

“They don’t have the reserve that we have built into our conversations. They always get to the heart and soul of the matter.” Stone says.

Cirrelda Snider-Bryan, an environmental educator at the Natural History Museum, who has been a guest, thinks Stone “is really a scientist at heart because she’s always covering science themes.”

Kids are “paying a lot more attention than we give them credit for,” says Stone, who tackles complex topics because her own children were fascinated by science yet terribly let down by the curriculum in the Albuquerque Public Schools. “The testing in our state is on math and reading, while that’s great, what’s fun in school is science.”

Giving voice

“I have a strong belief that public radio is ours, and part of that is reaching out and finding kids and putting them on the air,” Stone says. “KUNM has a very explicit mission to serve the underserved, to be the voice for the people who don’t have a voice. In my mind, kids don’t ever have a voice.”

In fact, that voice may represent her most revolutionary contribution to radio. KUNM General Manager Richard Towne says he tunes in just for “the kids’ voices, as he believes many adults do. “It’s refreshing, not something you find anywhere else on the radio.”

Some kids have been on the show for as long as 10 years. Anna Gilboard, a seventh grader at the Bosque School, started with the show three or four years ago because she wants to be an actress. Through it, Anna says, she has gained a sense of “community.”

For children who listen in, hearing other young voices on the radio is immensely appealing, says Snider Bryan, whose own daughter tuned in as she was growing up. “It’s a true gift that she gives the community, and I often think how lucky we are to have that in Albuquerque.”

Keiko Ohnuma is a freelance journalist who lives in Corrales. She is the former publisher of the Bosque Beast.