

# STUDIO 3

## Finding His Voice

Radio host John Reid has never had a problem expressing himself. But now he's more open than ever.

BY JASON ROOP



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# ON HIS TIME

HOW BROADCASTER JOHN REID HAS NAVIGATED A LIFE OF UPS, DOWNS AND WHAT HE CALLS AN “AWKWARD EXISTENCE” THAT INFORMS A NEW CAREER MILESTONE.

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## A CLOCK RUNS MOST OF JOHN REID'S LIFE.

He's on the road this morning by 1:45, bound for Williamsburg. He arrives by 3 to pick up his credentials, pass through security, arrange his makeshift studio on a table outdoors and be on the air by 5:30, set to talk for the next four and a half hours.

When Reid left his job 15 years ago as morning co-anchor at WRIC-TV 8 in Richmond, he swore he'd never again work the sunrise shift.

But here he is. Back to broadcasting. Back home.

And the sun won't rise till 6:09 a.m.

In a few hours, President Donald Trump will step into an air-conditioned tent not far from Reid, on the back lawn of the Jamestown Settlement — the site of America's first permanent English colony and the destination of a gazillion school field trips.

It's July 30 — 400 years to the day since colonists convened the first House of Burgesses, the beginning of representative democracy in America. Today's ceremonies will kick off related educational and cultural programs across Virginia.

With Trump's presence, anything could happen.

Reid brought his show here because he knows this event will resonate with his audience on Newsradio 1140 WRVA. The station is 94 years old, with the biggest

signal reach and highest ratings of any Richmond news and talk station.

It also airs the most politically conservative programming. Voices later in the day include the nationally syndicated Glenn Beck, Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity, with Richmond-based Jeff Katz as host of the weekday drive-time call-in show.

Reid's program mix, with producer Trey Yeatts, is less politically charged. It includes his conservative and libertarian perspectives alongside interviews with guests from across the spectrum. From 5:30-10 a.m., it hits on news, business reports, entertainment updates, weather, traffic and sports.

“The last thing I want it to be is boring,” Reid says.

Since broadcasting atop the Eiffel Tower at Kings Dominion a year ago, Reid has worked to get the show out of the studio, off Basie Road in Henrico County. Most Fridays, he takes it to sites of interest across Richmond and elsewhere for “Reid on the Road,” and for occasions such as today.

At the Jamestown Settlement, faint shouts from protesters are audible in the distance. A bomb-sniffing dog checks camera equipment. In front of Reid's broadcast setup, dignitaries and guests move through a line toward a metal detector.

Democratic Gov. Ralph Northam speaks — “pretty high on the pandering scale,” Reid remarks on air — and slips away before the president is scheduled to





After a career as morning anchor at WRIC-TV 8 in Richmond, Reid set off for a career in political communications and public relations. But he returned to town in December 2017 to become morning host on Newsradio 1140 WRVA, heard on 1140 AM and 96.1 FM.





**By the time the American Evolution ceremonies end at Jamestown Settlement on July 30, Reid has been up for 12 hours. He'll attend another event before heading back to Richmond**

arrive. Most Democratic legislators aren't in attendance.

Since Reid signed on this morning, Trump has tweeted about terrorism, infrastructure, immigration law loopholes, the left's stance on open borders, the weakness of the Chinese economy and the "really crashed" ratings of "Morning Joe & Psycho."

Then at 9:55 a.m. comes a tweet that he's on his way to Jamestown.

"Word is the Democrats will make it as uncomfortable as possible," Trump writes, "but that's ok because today is not about them!"

These are heady times for public discourse — and by extension, the role of talk radio.

The president talks like no president in history. Encountering an opposing view seems to come with shorter fuses and fiercer tribe loyalty. Social media makes it easy to hold close those who agree. You can cultivate friends and timelines that reflect your worldview. There's little persuading, more perturbation and less patience with

the other side.

This is the environment in which Reid enters the world of talk radio, where discourse has been both revered and reviled.

People continue to tune in, making news and talk the No. 1 radio format, Nielsen reports. They're a big part of a broad audience. Nearly 90 percent of Americans ages 12 and older listen to the radio in a given week, according to a state of the media report released by the Pew Research Center in July.

There's an intimacy to radio that lends itself to community ties, relevant information and strong connections. It's also blamed for attention-grabbing division, bombastic personalities and overheated hype for the sake of ratings.

Is healthy debate still possible?

Can we speak with each other and really listen?

Can we disagree and come out the better for it?

Reid says yes.

On air, he says, his personality as a consensus builder helps. He aims to show respect, give room to guests with opposing views and work to understand the

esty," says one of Reid's bosses, Gregg Henson, program director for Entercom Richmond's WRVA and its sports radio station, WRNL the Fan, which airs on 910 AM and 106.1 FM.

"John is a Southern gentleman," Henson says. "He'll listen, he'll hear you out. You don't ever hear him get upset on the air, but he's very pointed in his comments."

Friends and colleagues say Reid simply is nice — but not Mr. Rogers. He pushes buttons and speaks his mind, and at 6-foot-3 can wield a commanding presence. But he walks the line between opinionated and genial.

Reid, 48, attributes that to an "awkward existence" he's lived between groups that can be socially, politically, diametrically opposed.

"Half my life I'm around liberal, pro-gay people who can't believe that they're talking to a conservative Republican," Reid says. "And then the other half, I'm around very conservative people, some of whom never thought that they would engage with an openly gay guy."

Depending on the situation, Reid can find himself coming out twice. As gay, as a Republican. The process continues to be challenging, he says. But he's able to leverage it as strength in communication, both off and on the air.

"I try to be respectful of both groups," he says. "And I try to unify people if I can. It's not going to happen every time. But when you've lived most of your adult life under those circumstances, one revelation away from people rejecting you — and sometimes very harshly — you learn to navigate."

other sides. He also wants to be the same person you'd meet off the air.

That's what it takes to succeed in this job — "complete and total hon-



**Production assistant Matthew Leibowitz listens in while Reid interviews Delegate John McGuire during the on-location broadcast at Jamestown Settlement.**





**Reid's office at WRVA is filled with memorabilia from travels to 85 countries and political campaign trinkets. Framed photos include a zero-gravity NASA experience Reid took, a family picture at his sister's wedding, he and his partner, Alonzo, and a signed photo from President Trump.**

**B**efore he graduated from high school, Reid was using his voice to take him places — like the Statue of Liberty.

He grew up in Tuckahoe Village with his older sister, Lisa, and their parents, Jack and Judi. His dad, who later served in the House of Delegates from 1990-2008, was the principal at Robious Middle School and eventually worked with Henrico school superintendents. His mom took a variety of jobs that allowed her to be home with her children by 3:30 in the afternoon.

Reid attended Carver Elementary in Henrico and Byrd Middle, now Quiocassin. Then he entered the private college prep school, St. Christopher's, where he graduated in 1989. He was an Eagle Scout and president of the student government, and had a knack, one fellow student recalls, for performing spot-on, brave impressions of teachers.

He enjoyed speaking, at school and Scouting events, and eventually put together a demo reel to try out for voice-over gigs with the help of two people who worked in radio. One was Tim Timberlake, who for years sat in the host chair at WRVA.

Reid had a “rather prodigious ability to do voice work,” Timberlake recalls, “to be a good announcer even that young.”

Reid says he started launching FedEx

packages toward David Wolper in Los Angeles. The prolific producer's credits included “Roots,” “Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory” and the 1984 Summer Olympics. After 10 letters Reid broke through, he says. Wolper put him in touch with the producer of Liberty Weekend, the 100th anniversary of the Statue of Liberty in 1986.

That's how he ended up, at 15, giving a five-minute speech at the event's closing arena show, representing the youth of America. He was on stage with first lady Nancy Reagan, met Lee Iacocca and spoke with Walter Cronkite, who later sent him a note saying, “Well you sound like you have a career in broadcasting.”

As he was preparing for high school graduation, his dad was working on his run for the House of Delegates. It was a good time to head out of Richmond for college.

“I didn't want to be the son of the guy in the General Assembly,” Reid says. “I wanted to be my own person.”

He earned a bachelor's degree in political science at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, and started interning at the CBS station there. After graduation he left for L.A. to intern in Ronald Reagan's press office and explore the entertainment and news industries.

He returned to Waco as the overnight producer for the CBS affiliate, working 10 p.m. to 10 a.m. on “Good Morning Central Texas.”

Reid persuaded the station to give him a shot on-air covering the Baylor

homecoming parade. “When I came to work on Monday,” he recalls, “they said, ‘You're on the air and you're going to be a reporter now.’”

He loved it.

In addition to reporting on serious news, like the Ku Klux Klan marching through town, Reid looked for ways to stand out. When it finally snowed one Christmas, he was the only reporter around. He sweet-talked a janitor at the tallest building in Waco to let him in, where he set up a broadcast from the roof.

A job opening at Channel 8 in Richmond brought him home in 1994. He worked as a weekend anchor and investigative reporter before landing a spot on the morning show as a co-anchor.

There was nowhere to go but up. Channel 8's morning show was fourth in the ratings, Reid says — behind Channel 12, Channel 6, and the cartoons on Fox.

**T**elevision news looked a lot different 20 years ago. There was no social media, no roving around the studio, no behind-the-scenes peeks.

The morning show team coalesced with Reid and Gwen Williams as co-anchors and Keri Abbott reporting the weather.

“We just clicked,” says Abbott, who now works in sales in Richmond. “We just had fun.” And they started to see ratings growth.

It was Reid who pushed for new ideas, Abbott recalls — anything to make them stand out. More cross-talk between anchors, more hot topics, lifestyle segments and different ways of presenting the news than simply sitting behind the desk.

“We're not going to beat Channel 12 doing another version of Channel 12,” Reid says. “I have always had fights with consultants, because they want you to do it exactly the same way as everybody else.”

But his news director and station managers were open to change.

“He brought to the table something new, something fresh,” Abbott says.

To celebrate Richmond's first snow of the season, Reid hired someone from the Byrd Theatre to bring in a snow machine to make it snow on set.

It was innovative, but Reid had to promise to clean up the artificial snow. He says the evening anchors, Lisa Schafner and Rick Young, weren't too thrilled when they saw how the machine left marks on the studio floor.

Another experiment was Pump It Up Friday, where they opened the studio into the parking lot at the Arboretum station. They invited bands and other community groups — sometimes 300 to 400 people would show up. Police directed traffic.

Channel 8 finally broke out of its rat- **13**



ings slump, hitting second place — and for at least one ratings book, Abbott says, even first.

But not everything was fun and games. Reid wasn't yet fully out, and says he was anxious that revelations about his personal life would hurt his professional career.

He also faced a crossroads in television, figuring out whether he wanted to forge a long career in Richmond or try something new. He opted to make a move. "I want to do stuff," he says.

Former Gov. George Allen, a Republican, had won election to the Senate — "an amazing governor," Reid says, "and a dynamic guy."

A job as director of communications for Allen's Senate office opened up in 2004. "I thought: 'This is my chance. I'll go to Washington, I'll see how this works out.'"

It freed him, both personally and professionally, kicking off a second career in political communication and public relations.

Philip Crosby, executive director at Richmond Triangle Players and a longtime voice for LGBTQ issues, met Reid in the 1980s.

It wasn't Reid's orientation as gay that surprised him, Crosby says: "The revelation for me was when he went to work for George Allen."

Crosby's had his share of maddening political debates with Reid on Facebook — and that's OK, he says. "We love the country, we love everything about it equally as much," he says, even if they have totally different ideas about making it better.

Reid says Allen, a social conservative, never had an issue with his personal life. He says Allen told him, "You're a good person, just do a good job."

Others took a different stance.

Reid recalls a blog that aimed to out gay Republicans working on Capitol Hill and their bosses as hypocrites. When a left-wing journalist called Reid about his personal life, he says, Reid told him he wouldn't dignify such questions at work. "But if you see me at a gay bar you can ask me a question," he said, "because I'm a very friendly guy."

The experience demonstrated to him that for some people, he would never be "out enough" that he couldn't make everyone happy. So he's never had a flip-the-switch coming-out moment where a weight lifted off his shoulders.

"I'm glad that I'm more comfortable with who I am," he says. "But I wouldn't say that I've ever felt totally free, because I've always been attacked."

Reid worked with Allen's office until 2007, when the senator lost re-election to Jim Webb. From there, he had stints as director of communications for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and with private public relations firms. One sent him overseas to the Middle East for three years. He's traveled to 85 countries.

When Trump became president, Reid presumed that he would continue his public relations career. "I kept hoping ... that my fortunes would turn and all these PR firms would want a Republican" to help them build relationships with the new administration.

Instead, he says, things got more toxic. "It was so polarized and ugly."

That's when he learned in the summer of 2017 that morning host Jimmy Barrett was leaving WRVA after 16 years.

"In my heart of hearts," he says, "I am a broadcaster."

Reid interviewed and waited while the station transitioned to new owners. Entercom was buying WRVA from



**Reid arrives for his show, which runs from 5:30-10 a.m. on WRVA, around 5 a.m. Ratings show that the station is growing among its key demographic, and managers say there are signs of increased interest from younger listeners.**

iHeartMedia, formerly Clear Channel — along with such sister stations as XL102, Q94, Mix 98.1 and the Beat 106.5.

Reid was the first Entercom employee hired in Richmond, on Dec. 4, 2017. He returned to his hometown. His partner, Alonzo Mable, moved with him from Washington. They started their relationship that year, Mable says, and "it's been a hit since."

Like other media outlets, WRVA has faced layoffs, financial challenges and a changing industry. But ratings are up, says Henson, the program director.

The station's key demographic, men ages 25 to 54, has grown 12 percent from Nielsen's winter ratings book to its spring ratings book, he says.

Results of the May to July ratings period, published last week, show WRVA has moved from eighth to sixth place, according to the Nielsen Topline radio ratings of Richmond-area listeners 12 and older who tuned in to the average quarter hour.

The station also is seeing sellouts at 300-seat events called Politics and Pints, where Reid, Katz and a liberal guest discuss current issues onstage. People are paying \$50 and more for tickets.

"We're growing," Henson says, "and a lot of that is because of John."

**T**he clock is ticking toward the end of Reid's show from the Jamestown Settlement, where the Virginia legislature is divided, a good chunk absent, because of the president's pending appearance.

It's too bad, Reid says. Elected officials should set aside differences during ceremonial events that are bigger than themselves.

"It doesn't mean you have to vote for him," he says.

"It's not an endorsement of their policies. It's called grace and class. I'm sure a lot of people will say Donald Trump doesn't have that, but even Donald Trump shows up for the ceremonial stuff."

He speaks on air about the issue. Trump will become the first sitting president to address the Virginia General Assembly in 400 years, and it is symbolic. The event should be considered and remembered for its historic implications, he says, a colony that almost didn't survive, the struggle, the determination and ideas that began the evolution of a country into "a remarkably successful society," he says on air.

That should be "inspirational to everyone."

Reid signs off at 9:54 a.m. With the show's producer back in Richmond, Reid records a few quick intros to play later, introducing the president's remarks on air.

He hands his equipment off to a production assistant, goes through another Secret Service screening, and is inside the tent by 10:07.

He finds a folding chair in the back, settling into one of the areas reserved for dozens of media representatives forming the White House press pool. He checks his phone, looks at the program and surveys the rows of about 700 people ahead of him. He leans over to whisper, "Which one do you think is a protester?"

A protester? Here? In this tightly secured environment? Reid turned out to be right. **S**

*Jason Roop is a former editor of Style and the founder of Springstory. He appears as an unpaid guest in Friday segments on WRVA to discuss water-cooler headlines and weekend events. Style did not make this story available to Reid or anyone at the station before publication.*