

# Mama on the Mike

## NANCI OLESEN AND HER TEENAGE RADIO SHOW

by Jennifer Niesslein

**ON SEPTEMBER 25**, the last weekly installment of “MOMbo, A Mom Show” aired. The show, a half-hour of commentary and interviews, was the only weekly, mom-centric, nationally syndicated program of its kind. At the moment her prerecorded voice was signing off, Nanci Olesen, MOMbo’s host and producer of eleven years, was carrying bread, pesto, tapenade, and vegetables into a spare studio at the station, Minneapolis’s KFAI, for a bon voyage party.

“When [a week earlier] I taped the last show with Dan, my engineer, I felt shaky at the beginning, like I was going to cry. Then I remembered seeing Bonnie Raitt in concert at the State Fair a few weeks ago and how powerful she had been and gutsy and emotive but *never* over the top. I used her as my visual example. We made it through the whole show, putting it all down on the computer, until it was time to read the credits. I started: ‘MOMbo is produced and hosted by Nanci Olesen ...’ and I started to sob uncontrollably. Being the professional (!) that I am, I snorted to Dan, ‘Just a moment, I’ll be right with you.’ As if he couldn’t *tell* I was *sobbing*! I pulled myself together just about one minute later, and I said, ‘Okay, I’m ready to go now.’ I looked up at him and *he* was crying! That touched me so much. But in my stoic Minnesota way, I started to laugh, and said, ‘*Okay*, let’s go.’ We made it through.”

MOMbo began as a live show in 1991, a year after Olesen became a mother (she’s since had two more kids). “I especially was interested in what I used to call ‘the underbelly of motherhood’—that creepy feeling that I was getting that this was *way* more intense than I expected and that nobody had really prepared me for it ... We give lipservice to [motherhood] as a culture but we really degrade it in the business world, the political world, and everywhere. The way I thought I could help was by just presenting a half hour of my own musings, some interviews with noteworthy thinkers about these subjects, and just pepper it with some strategies for getting through the day, some humor and insight, and some good accordian music.”

Olesen recalls nursing on air then reaching over to stick a CD in the CD player, in the flying-by-the-seat-of-her-pants local days. Then, in 1997, the Pacifica Radio Network approved MOMbo’s application and—voila!—it was syndicated. “I suddenly had the feeling that I had hit the big time, which kind of cracks me up now. Although Pacifica was footing the bill for the satellite uplink [the way stations receive the program], every other cost was up to me and I still wasn’t being paid as a producer, because it’s all community public radio! So I got an engineer to help me, but although she was dedicated, she knew next to nothing about the engineering. Those first six months it took eight hours in the studio every Saturday just to *record* the show correctly and get it sent off. That first year I estimate I spent sixty hours per week produc-



Nanci Olesen (left), with MOMbo commentators Julia Jergensen Edelman and Kris Berggren, plus Jonah Edelman and Olesen's daughter Nora Epp.

ing the show. And it weren't no nine-to-five kind of hours either! It was middle of the night, middle of the kids' naps, whenever!

"The irony of all ironies is saying to your kids: 'You guys. Dad is going to put you to bed tonight because I have to run upstairs and work on the show.' And then I'd be sequestered in the office (which is the size of a small closet) for six hours, putting together a show about *motherhood!* Our office is also right next to our tiny bedroom, and we have a loud printer, and so every Tuesday night at about one a.m., my husband would have to put a pillow over his head while I printed out the script. Then I would sneak around the house for another half-hour, gather-

ing together all my tapes and CDs and mailers and notebooks so that, at the crack of dawn, I could get to KFAI to produce that week's show."

MOMbo's guest roster reads, in some ways, like a Who's Who of motherhood media: She's interviewed people from Ann Crittenden (*The Price of Motherhood*) to Mary Pipher (*Reviving Ophelia*) to lesser-known mothers. "In radio, you have to be kind of sneaky because the funniest woman in the world off-mike can suddenly clam up in front of the microphone," she says.

It was off-mike, on a family vacation in Wyoming, that Olesen decided to stop the weekly gig. "I was going to take a nap in the passenger seat when suddenly I sat up

and said, 'That's it. I have to stop the weekly show.' It was amazing to me, because I hadn't been looking for any big answers. But the pace of my week-to-week life at home seemed difficult to return to. The weekly show kept me so occupied each week that I was never able to get to all the things I wanted to accomplish with MOMbo. Plus, I wanted to stop working at night. I felt like my children were growing up in front of me, right there in the van. I mean, how crazy is it to have a show about *motherhood* and the *value* of it, a show that ends with the sentences: 'Love your kids. Be good to yourself' and to be a *ragged* mom from the producing of it every week?

"I wish I could say that there are hundreds of radio producers I know out there who are all getting their mom shows on the air every week. But motherhood is dealt with on Mother's Day, and that's about it. Think of how much business reporting you hear every day, especially on public radio! I don't know what the future holds for mom-centric radio, but I'm very dedicated to keeping it out there."

Olesen says the show isn't over— just moving into its adolescence. Like a teen, it won't be around as much. But it will exist as an organization and put out occasional specials, like January's "A MOMbo New Year: Revelry and Reflection," featuring Olesen, and guests Arlie Hochschild (*The Time Bind*, *The Second Shift*) and Ayun Halliday (*The Big Rumpus*). Olesen is also hoping to organize a "Mom Convergence" sometime next year. Check out mombo.org to get the latest. You can listen to past shows at webactive.com. •