

TODAY'S QUOTE

"I get those maternal feelings. Like when I'm lying on the couch and can't reach the remote. 'Boy, a kid would be nice, right now.'"

—Kathleen Madigan,  
U.S. standup comic

# VARIETY

After 11 years on KFAI advising other mothers to take care of themselves, Nanci Olesen's message still sounds fresh.



David Brewster/Star Tribune

Nanci Olesen is host and producer of her weekly "MOMbo" radio show on KFAI. As a volunteer, she does everything from interviewing to burning CDs of the show to send to other stations.

## Doing the MOMbo



Joey McLeister/Star Tribune

Nanci Olesen, who says she has her "graduate degree in toddlerhood," says motherhood spurred her to start "MOMbo." She draws inspiration from her three children, including her piano-playing daughters, 6-year-old Lenø Epp, left, and Nora Epp, 8.

By Paul Levy  
Star Tribune Staff Writer

"I came across 'MOMbo' on kind of a bad kid day," Suzanne Stenson O'Brien recalled. "I was driving in the car on the highway, just thinking to myself that I was a crappy parent. There was just nothing on the radio and I literally hit 90.3 and the first words out of the radio were:

"It's OK. You're not a bad parent."  
"And all I could think was, 'Who are you? And why are you in my radio?'"

"MOMbo" is Nanci Olesen, a former circus performer and stiltwalker, a sometime puppeteer and actor, who spends 29 minutes each Wednesday "ranting" about the most challenging role she's ever played—the joy, frustration, thrill and exhaustion of motherhood.

Should you vaccinate your child? Circumcise? Home-school? "MOMbo" may not have the answers, but the show doesn't duck any issues, either. This is a "mom show with attitude" and the voice, creator, writer, stampicker and unpaid driving force behind it is a Minneapolis mother of three who says she's earned her "graduate degree in toddlerhood."

"I have been pregnant three times; I feel like I bring the source material to the interview," Olesen said recently before taping her 11:30 a.m. show at KFAI public-radio studios on Minneapolis' West Bank.

### Never ending battle

What Olesen brings to the airwaves is more personality than personal agenda. She's still in the trenches. Being a mom changes everything, she tells listeners each week. You're never going to recover from it, so take care of yourself.

### OLESSEN continues on E2:

—Between raising three kids and a full slate of activities, she knows of what she speaks.

## OLESEN from E1

# With 3 kids, force behind 'MOMbo' has credibility

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Olesen, 42, knows all about burning candles at both ends. She's raising three kids — ages 6, 8 and 11 — with husband and local actor Steven Epp. She works for a Minneapolis caterer, writes freelance pieces for Minnesota Public Radio, takes care of her turn-of-the-century south Minneapolis home, sometimes teaches and performs as a puppeteer at the Heart of the Beast Theatre and serves on the board of the Lake Country Montessori School.

Then there is "MOMbo," a 10- to 30-hour per week roller coaster that veers right through the peaks and valleys of motherhood. Olesen selects show topics, writes all the scripts, does almost all the interviews, chooses music, burns and mails compact discs of shows to subscribing stations, and is constantly fundraising.

She does everything but get paid.

"I don't have a salary and I'm barely surviving," Olesen said. "But the important thing is the show. They don't pay me, but they don't charge me, either."

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### Who listens?

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recognized in 1999 as one of Ms. Magazine's women to watch. She now has an intern, Amanda Cross, who does interviews. And casual listener Suzanne Stenson O'Brien of St. Paul became so enchanted with Olesen's show that she volunteered to do grant-writing, promote and, last month, help set up a Web site for "MOMbo."

"It's critical to have this kind of resource on the radio for someone like me," said Stenson O'Brien, who has spent 10 years working with media and is the mother of two. "It's my goal to get "MOMbo" to be self-supporting. I think it will happen. Nanci is the embodiment of someone who has done something so well, for such a long time, that somebody will notice!"

But Olesen can't be sure how many others have discovered "MOMbo." Even on a clear day, KFAI's signal doesn't carry far beyond the Minneapolis or St. Paul city limits. (KFAI can be found at 90.3 FM in Minneapolis and 106.7 FM in St. Paul.)

Four years ago, Pacifica Network News in Washington, D.C., picked up the show and now broadcasts it to another 10 stations — some in cities you'd be hard pressed to locate on a detailed map.

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the cities that broadcast her show. Among the others: East Orland, Maine; Astoria, Ore.; Provincetown, Mass., and Hoopa, Calif.

"The success of the show is in my head," Olesen said.

### Looking for support

She has a file of rejection letters and, after 11 years, seems genuinely grateful to KFAI for allowing her to continue. She's constantly scrambling to find sponsors to pay for the show's costs, which are at least \$200 a month. Her most consistent supporter? Her mother, who contributes \$100 per month toward the show.

Olesen, who twice was a member of all-women canoe expeditions to the Arctic Ocean, began her "MOMbo" journey in 1991, a year after she went to all-volunteer KFAI to host and produce "Artifacts," Minneapolis' only weekly radio arts program. She produced an hourlong midday program about the continuing drama between the "working" mom and "at-home" mom.

She found her niche. And she found herself.

"Motherhood really threw me for a loop," said Olesen, who stopped acting a year after Henry, her oldest child, was born.

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### 'MOMbo' Fundraiser

**What:** First-ever "MOMbo" fundraiser, featuring food and a musical act, the Brawny Mother Folkers.

**When:** Sunday, 5 to 8 p.m.

**Where:** Birchwood Cafe, 3311 E. 25th St., Minneapolis.

**Admission:** Donations of \$10 per person suggested.

**Contact:** RSVP to 612-341-3144, ext. 839.

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Radio seemed the perfect medium, in part because of Olesen's soothing voice and direct manner, but mostly because it's so personal. Families don't huddle around radios as they did a half-century ago. Many listeners are alone when they hear "MOMbo."

And if Olesen has no idea how many are listening, she knows exactly *who* her fans are. Most likely, they are mothers who want to "cure" the problems *they* had as children. She knows "MOMbo" listeners often feel overwhelmed, incompetent. All "know where the line is."

If they don't, "MOMbo" is there to remind them.

*"I hope you're well. You know the big mother underlying message of 'MOMbo' is be good to yourself. You. The mom. It starts with you, babe. Sit down. Cross some stuff off your list. Have a cup of tea."*

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— Paul Levy is at [plevy@startribune.com](mailto:plevy@startribune.com).

Published: February 18, 2002

Section: VARIETY

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