

*Hello and welcome to COM-Versations, your School of Communication podcast. Here in the School of COM, we know how to make Fell Hall fun. Tune in often to hear the latest COM-versations among faculty, staff, and students. After all, we're the best in the Midwest for a reason. I'm Julie Navickas and today I'm joined by my co-host Dr. Lance Lippert, professor of communication studies and Steve Suess, director of WZND radio. Welcome!*

SS: Happy to be here. Yeah.

LL: Did you hear what she said? My voice is kind of problematic today, but.

SS: Well, I deal with plenty of problematic voices.

LL: You do.

SS: On a daily basis.

LL: Oh, ouch. Well, she said, when she said we know how to have fun in Fell Hall, that includes what happens...

SS: Oh, most definitely I would say all of our co-curriculars are an extreme amount of fun, but also a very valuable...

LL: And you, get this, Steve I know you're, boy I've been here awhile, you were a student of mine.

SS: Yes.

LL: Many years ago.

JN: Really?

SS: Yeah.

LL: She said that like she feels sorry for me.

SS: Not undergrad, I had you in graduate school.

LL: Yeah!

SS: The leadership seminar.

LL: So, when did you...you graduated from here when?

SS: So undergrad I was here from '06 to '10.

LL: Right.

SS: Graduated with a bachelors in '10 and then immediately afterward you know, the job market in broadcasting after the 2008 housing crisis wasn't exactly the best to go into so.

LL: I remember the 2008 housing crisis.

SS: Yeah, I got roped into graduate school cause teaching was something that I was considering at the time. I enjoyed it a lot and at that point, the job prospects in teaching were a little better than trying to go into broadcasting at the moment as everybody was you know, cutting staff and that type of thing, so.

LL: I remember that because you had some tough choices to make and...

SS: I did.

LL: And you ended up teaching for a bit then we were lucky to have you come back, and I'm very fortunate I think, I was going to say here's a guy who knows how to...it is fun but also you can accomplish quite a bit while you're having fun or enjoying it. It doesn't have to be a drudgery.

SS: And I, you know when I talked to prospective students like this summer, you know Julie and I were on panels talking to high school students or preview panels of students who were already coming here. That's the trade off in the School of COM, right? You are going to have more fun with your academics in the School of COM than you will probably anywhere else on campus. I mean maybe a theater major, somebody's also having an equal amount of fun—no one's having more fun than us, right? But you know, your roommate's gonna go to class, come back home, and do whatever and they're not gonna spend as much time on their academics as you will, right, in the School of COM. But in the School of COM, your academics are much more fun. You get to do stuff, you get to get your hands dirty, you get to create things, right? Even in some of the more traditional academic, you know I'd rather write a 20-page research paper about interpersonal relationships than you know whatever math they're doing over in the College of Business, so yeah.

JN: Well, thank you.

SS: Yeah.

LL: But you can do math?

SS: I can.

LL: Okay—

SS: I can, and I also tell my COM students this because some of them choose this major because they're afraid. They're...math apathy, they either are afraid of it or don't care about math, but math is an essential skill it's just a different kind of math in broadcasting. You get really good at subtracting from 60, right? Seconds and minutes and yeah counting time, right.

LL: And if you try to use the clock and it doesn't always work, you have to figure this out so.

SS: Right.

LL: Okay, let's do the math here. Julie help me out here.

JN: That's a bad idea.

LL: Let's see. You won your first Station of the Year award, right? What year was that?

SS: That would have been 2018.

LL: And then so one plus...how many do we have? Tell me how many we have total.

SS: We have 4 total.

LL: So, one plus blank equals four. Help me.

SS: Three.

LL: Oh my gosh! No math apathy here.

SS: Yeah, there you go. And the last three have been consecutive, the last three years so. We, you know we're grateful that the Broadcast Education Association has allowed us to keep winning. You know sometimes you get these types of awards.

LL: Yeah.

SS: There's a little bit of spread your, spread the wealth you know, let's let somebody else take the credit and the accolades but you know our students have earned it and they've done an excellent job, so.

LL: Congratulations that certainly speaks volumes about the tradition we've had here, and I know there's a lot of quality before you came in, but I really think and other people have confirmed it with me, that you brought a lot in to set this up and set the station. You work here, you have some other colleagues that you work with, but you do a great job.

SS: Well and I think a lot of that has been the investment that the School's made in facilities and faculty. I mean, you know you mentioned having a lot of success before I got here, well it was one faculty member doing everything before I got here. Now there's some shared responsibility in the basement, we can focus heavier in on certain areas, you know. We're billing 40 grand a year on ZND now.

LL: Help me out, does Deb have her own parking place?

SS: Those records are sealed. Look, Deb Lesser can smile at anyone on campus and get just about anything she wants.

LL: I know! It's just not fair! I'm getting upset and then she smiles at me and yeah.

SS: if it's been a couple weeks after I put in a facilities ticket, I usually just have Deb pick up the phone with a smile and we're good to go by the end of the day.

LL: And so, she's still with us. She had retired but working with us and teaming up with Steve. One other thought here, you said we're billing 40,000. I understand that we are not, we went on air a few years ago. Over the air, not just on the Internet.

SS: A late 2010, the station got its over the air license and LPFM so, and when I say billing, I mean it is underwriting, so it's contributions, much like an NPR station would be. But the fact that we've been able to become more self-sustaining and we're not reliant on fees from the Dean of Students office who have been very good to all of the student orgs in the School of COM. Specifically last year, the Dean of Students office helped take all of our students to Las Vegas so they could accept that award at the B.E.A. convention. So, the Dean of Students office has been great, but it's a little bit of an unreliable funding structure. You have to beg for your budget once a year and then you get a letter in the summer that says, *Here's how much you have*. When we can control more of our own destiny on that, we feel a lot more comfortable.

LL: Well, that's terrific, and I remember the conversation. I've worked in this at different places before, but for a college station to get an over the air license, pretty amazing but you still also have a streaming presence as well too. That online place is really...

SS: A streaming and then you know our digital product goes beyond streaming now. I mean, we have four social channels we're constantly posting on, some of that content is original to those social channels. And some of it's sold! I mean we have sponsored content on our digital platforms now. So, we're taking the stuff from the classroom, and we are practicing what we're preaching, you know.

JN: Yeah, without a doubt. Well Steve I'd love to hear about, you know your journey here as a Redbird. I know you mentioned—

SS: Sure.

JN: —obviously a student here, but tell us a little bit more, I mean why did you choose it?

SS: Well, it's kind of funny I, you know, I came here with essentially one of two potential career paths. It was either a sports announcer or a meteorologist. Now, we don't have a meteorology program here.

JN: I didn't...

LL: Well, what did you choose?

SS: Yeah exactly, and now I'm teaching right? So, I get here, I am accepted to Illinois State, but I get a conditional acceptance letter, right? I don't get accepted into the major right away—may have slept through too many high school classes, who knows what happened on that situation. I actually came here because I went to high school speech camp and hung out with the Forensics folks while I was here as a high school junior in between my junior and senior year. And while we were, while I was practicing down in the basement I saw, *Hey there's a radio station right there*. And, you know, got a little bit of info and I was like, *I wanna, that's where I wanna be*. So,

even though I wasn't in the major, I showed up to campus. I was in Steve Perry's COM 160 class, and a student from WZND came by and said, *Here's when our info meeting is, here's how you can sign up and go audition and do all that.* As a freshman. Came in, did that, got on the squad. Did ZND all eight semesters of my undergrad and it was probably midway through my sophomore year where I was, you know I was at the station doing a bunch of work and Deb pulls me aside and says, *What's your major?* And I tell her, *Well, you know I wrote the personal narrative to get into the mass com,* at that point, *major* and I was like, *I never heard anything back, I don't know what the status is.* Well, by 5 o'clock that day I was a mass media major, so. You know it's still, to this day, I kind of take that as an example of you know build relationships with faculty in the School of COM because they're gonna take care of you and make sure that you're getting what you need to succeed. And that happened early in my academic career and it's something I still don't forget. And I'm happy to continue to, you know, find sort of those situations today and help someone in the same way that I was helped early in my academic career, so.

LL: And the Deb we keep mentioning is Deb Lesser.

JN: Yes.

LL: She's big, but not as big as like Madonna, I mean it's just one name is all...

SS: Cher.

LL: Deb, yeah.

JN: Just Deb.

LL: Well, around here, it probably is.

SS: Right, yeah, if you say if Deb—

LL: You know.

SS: —I think people around here would know.

JN: Kind of figure it out.

SS: So, yeah, I did that, I was involved with TV-10 throughout most of my college career. I was in STW for all eight semesters, Student Television Workshop. So I was, you know even though I wasn't in the TV-10 curriculum yet, I was still doing TV things and video production things in the basement. Never got involved directly with the *Vidette*, but I worked with the students who were pretty frequently that would make coverage and things like that. I would constantly see Speech and Forensics students down in the basement because they're right next door to us, so you know I was pretty connected to the School of COM through the co-curricular activities that were offered here, so.

LL: And his name is still carved in the wall in the bathroom down there, too. There's a date right by that.

JN: In the bathroom?

LL: I'm not...I'm just saying, I can't tell you which bathroom cause that would incriminate both of us.

SS: There you go.

LL: That's pretty cool. Sounds like he's, yeah.

SS: So yeah, that was my undergrad story and again, you know job market not the greatest. I had some options but decided you know I'm gonna come back to ISU, I'm gonna do grad school. I was worried that I would never do it if I didn't do it right away.

JN: Yeah.

SS: I think that I think a lot of people are in that situation.

JN: For sure.

SS: Where they're like, *Oh I can do grad school later*. and then they just get caught up with their careers and all that and family life and all that. It becomes much tougher, so I'm happy that I did it right away. Started my teaching career, shout out to my old colleagues at Ashland University. Much smaller program, but I was thankful for the experience because I was able to...start from scratch. They were in situation where their station had been shut down for a period of time and I, they gave me the keys and said, *Drive*. So, I got to make it what I needed it to be and essentially it was a scaled down model of what we did here, and they were still doing extremely successful over there. Got an opportunity to come back, got the keys to the Mercedes and have tried not to screw it up too much since 2015.

LL: Well, you've done a good job of not screwing it up.

SS: Thank you, I appreciate it.

JN: Yes, without a doubt.

LL: I'm gonna...quick intermission, one quick story about Steve, I remember when he was thinking about going from undergrad to grad and then what was next, you started an online...what did we call it back then? It was not a podcast but a show about the Missouri Valley Conference about—

SS: Yeah.

LL: FCS.

SS: FCS football.

LL: FCS football.

SS: It was a podcast; it was a digital news platform essentially.

LL: Yeah, yeah.

SS: News and commentary. So, we would, we had a podcast, we would do our own weekly poll and we would have stringers, interns at schools across the country who would contribute to the website. It was a digital project that at one point I thought may have been a career avenue for me, and the sales side I just, I figured it out, but I didn't have the clientele to turn it into a career, so I just kept teaching. And unfortunately, I had to give it up because the rest of life just ended up taking over, but you know I felt confident moving into that digital space of creating my own brand because of what I learned in the School of COM. And you know I...certainly I always encourage COM students to get involved in student media. You know, you've got ZND, you've got Student Television Workshop, you have the Vidette. But if your, if a traditional media environment is not your space, create your own space. You have those tools now, just practice what you're doing in the classroom in a real-life scenario on your own digital platform, your own YouTube channel, your own TikTok account, whatever you've got, make it yours and practice what you're doing in the classroom and that was something that I did as a student too.

LL: You know...

JN: Yeah.

LL: Julie does that. She makes it her own. She, you know, she's an author and she has, she's...her web presence is...

SS: I mean—

JN: Thanks, Lance.

SS: You know, we have a lot—

LL: I mean that, I'm not joking.

SS: And I know, I know when, you know when you bring in some of the heavy hitter tenure track faculty in the School of COM, they're gonna come in here they're gonna talk about how many teaching awards the School of COM's won and all that. Yes, we're great teachers, we're great researchers in the School of COM, but I also want to highlight like you said Lance, all the creative work that happens from our faculty outside of the classroom. I mean take it take a guy like Dr. Simonds and the documentaries that he's produced and the screenplays that Dr. McHale has written. I mean there's a laundry list of creative work product from faculty in the School of COM that, in my opinion, goes pretty unmatched by peer institution.

LL: And I've heard of that list. It's always important because it's nice to show that we can practice—sorry—what we preach, and I think a lot of our colleagues have that experience,

some of it we don't even know about and you know it's just nice to be able to practice outside of this space and show that stuff's viable, Julie right? I mean.

JN: Yeah, without a doubt. I mean I think that that's a consistent message that we will share with our students, you know in and outside of the classroom is you know if you have an assignment, we always tell our students, you know, make it into something that's going to be valuable to you. How are you going to find utility in this? How is this gonna help your career? So, it's nice when, you know, we do those same things and demonstrate to our students, *Hey, you should do this too! It works.*

LL: Yeah, big time, big time right. You laughed when I said you did...that's crazy it's like, *Oh, he's not serious, where's the joke?* I don't, I get that all the time, but. No, it's really cool, so. Hey, I ran into Reggie the other day, but we had a volleyball tournament this week as my voice is kind of bad and I over—still talk too much from up here in the larynx rather than the, you know...like I was vulnerable, and this is what it sounds like. So, Reggie, I was just talking to Reggie, you know he started, he's starting a new thing he wants to be a beekeeper.

JN: A beekeeper.

LL: Yeah dude! Man, he's really into it and he's trying to find the right bees and he went into this shop, and he bought some bees for the first time. He only needed, it's really cool! He likes honey and he knows people over in the Athletics that like it so when you see him again, ask him, next time you see him at the game. So, he likes honey. So he went into this store, he needed a dozen bees for this one hive, and it had to be a certain kind and so he, *Okay, we've got em!* He's so excited he told me, so as he looks at his bag as the container with the bees in, he was counting them one, two, *There's 13 here! I only needed 12, I didn't pay for 13.* Cause Reggie's honest, right? Honest.

JN: Oh, without a doubt.

LL: Without a...there's 13 bees in here and the person, the beekeeper that sold him the bees said, *Well Reggie we're such big fans of yours we wanted to give you a freebie.*

SS: Oh boy.

JN: That was the lengthy story.

SS: That was, that was. We did, we took a, we took a long journey to the punchline, my friends.

LL: Well first of all, thank you for still calling me your friend. Second of all, Steve's over here, he's going, *Okay, Lance, wrap it up.* He's giving me that famous Steve Suess smile, yeah.

JN: I can see your face. That was a good one.

SS: I mean I have; I preach timeliness with my students while they're on the air, you know. If I had a student on the air doing that break, I'd be like, *Okay, yeah this has been about 30 seconds, man.*

LL: I know see because we're so fortunate that Julie said, *Well it just has to be around. There's no time, there's no time we have to be at.*

JN: That's true.

SS: That's the beauty of podcasting, right? There's no clock we're trying to do negative math on at this moment.

LL: Also, although there's the people listening to this and Julie going, *Lance.*

JN: That's why people listen.

SS Right, exactly.

JN: For Lance's jokes. That's it.

LL: Yeah, that's it? No, because Steve Suess. So, who can be a part of this program? I know you mentioned earlier you don't even have to be a major in the School of COM, but you have students from all over campus?

SS: Yeah, I would say right now our split is probably 80-20. 80% of our students at WZND are COM majors or COM minors. We do get a bunch of COM minors who are, you know English majors or sort of COM adjacent, and that makes up most of our students. But we are a student org so anyone can join. We just wrapped up auditions and all that this past week. Generally we have about a week of interviews and auditions after Festival ISU so we made our decisions, we put out the final lists on Friday and we're gonna have brand new folks coming in this week to be on the air for the first time or you know handle our social media for the first time, and a lot of first time experiences this week, it's one of my favorite weeks at the station.

JN: That's fun.

LL: What is it, where can we listen to you?

SS: Well 103.3 FM in the Bloomington-Normal area. Once you start to get out of town you start to lose signal it's an LPFM, you know you deal with what you can. WZND.com, you can stream live or find podcast content as well. You'll also find plenty of other apps that have our stream. And we also stream on campus, we're happy about that too. We're on, we're in the Bone 24/7, 365 on the main concourse level. There are other places that'll play us on campus. If you walk down the hall over at International Studies, they've got us on right now.

JN: Oh, that's fun.

SS: So yeah, there's plenty of places on campus depending on, you know who's working in that type of thing too. Sometimes we're on in the Rec, sometimes we're not, they haven't committed to keeping one thing on but. And you know obviously we have tons of content, digital as well that's not audio. We have video series; we have print product that's available on our website as well and lots of other stuff going on too.

LL: Truly a convergent experience, I'll use that word.

SS: Yeah.

LL: It's terrific. Wow, I get goosebumps. He's a pretty good colleague, isn't he? I'll tell you, lots going on yeah. I don't care what you said about Steve.

JN: Lance, shh. Well Steve, thank you so much for coming in and sharing a little bit about your history and your journey as a Redbird—

SS: Yeah!

JN: —and we appreciate it and all WZND does for the School of Communication.

SS: Happy to do it! I will take this episode and I will send you a rubric with a production grade at the end of it.

JN: I don't want that.

LL: Well, we all know what I'm gonna get.

JN: Mine will be a lower score than yours, Lance. Well thanks again Steve, we really appreciate it. And we will look forward to returning next week, we are gonna chat with Kevin Capie. We mentioned the award-winning student run newspaper the *Vidette*, so we will be back next week with Kevin. Thanks so much for listening!