

Reprinted from

# THE DENVER POST

Sunday, July 26, 2009

arts and entertainment

## Is this the best TV news in town?

Joanne Ostrow  
The Denver Post



KMGH's team of investigators consists of, counterclockwise from left, photojournalist Jason Foster; reporters Tony Kovalski, Theresa Marchetta and John Ferrugia; producer Art Kane; photojournalist/producer/reporter Jennifer Castor; and producer Tom Burke. The Channel 7 crew has racked up five investigative Emmy wins in five years. (Helen H. Richardson, The Denver Post)

Local television news viewers get what they deserve. And if they have low expectations, TV stations are happy to meet them. Who can blame a newscast for running stories about puppies when the ratings prove that's what people want?

Viewers here tend to watch out of habit — no matter what each station offers or promotes. The ratings are amazingly consistent over the long haul. Channel 9 is the top dog. The others vie for second place.

And that is what makes the extraordinary effort that Channel 7 puts into its daily newscasts so impressive. It is, and likely will be a for a long time, an also-ran in Denver's TV ratings. Yet it churns out some of the most important reporting in town.

At a time of cutbacks, layoffs and the demise of many "I-teams," Channel 7 is winning national recognition for consistently superior investigative pieces.

Whether exposing slow ambulance-response time at Denver International Airport, incompetence at the Denver Department of Human Services, a pattern of sexual harassment at the Air Force Academy, or politicians' wasteful spending in Black Hawk, KMGH-Channel 7 is doing the real work.

Those efforts are winning plaques and statues, if not numbers. KMGH has a slew of major journalism awards, including the

Peabody, the duPont-Columbia and local Emmys to show for its commitment.

Quite deliberately, the station has put together a news-gathering system that honors the quick thrills viewers desire, while carving out resources to pursue important topics.

"When (former general manager) Darrell Brown came here," investigative reporter John Ferrugia said, "he said we're going to focus on three things: weather, investigations and public service."

Brown, along with then-news director Byron Grandy, "put together a model where we could have the time and support to do long stories," Ferrugia said.

The management team has moved up the ladder, priorities intact.

"When we won the Peabody, Darrell Brown came down to our office and gave me a big hug," Ferrugia recalls. "I said, 'Thanks for letting us do this work.' He put both hands on my shoulders and said, 'This is who we are, this is what we do.'"

Beyond long stories, the investigative unit serves as a newsroom resource for other reporters. "When the tanker blows up on I-25,

we're into DOT records, calling Washington, doing background checks on the driver, the company. When you see those long stories on the air, you're seeing the tip of the iceberg," Ferrugia said. "That's the model."

### High ratings elusive

Of course, awards and effort don't necessarily translate to ratings.

Over the past 10 months, Channel 9's 10 p.m. newscast was a strong No. 1 in the 25-54 demographic, while channels 4 and 7 were in a dead heat for No. 2. Channel 31's strongly performing 9 p.m. newscast makes it a virtual three-way tie for second place.

For July, in the 25-54 age group valued by advertisers, Channel 9's late news averaged a 4.4 rating and 13 share (or percent of the viewing audience), Channel 4 was second with a 2.1 and 6 share, and Channel 31's late news (at 9 p.m.) was third with a 1.9 rating and 5 share. And Channel 7 trailed with a 1.6 rating and 5 share.

It's only natural that Channel 7 staffers feel frustration with the numbers. "You can only control the quality of work you do," Ferrugia said. Entrenched viewer habits are "legendary," he knows, "but in the age of the Web and select-your-own content, we're positioning ourselves to make investigative reporting destination television. A car accident is not destination television."

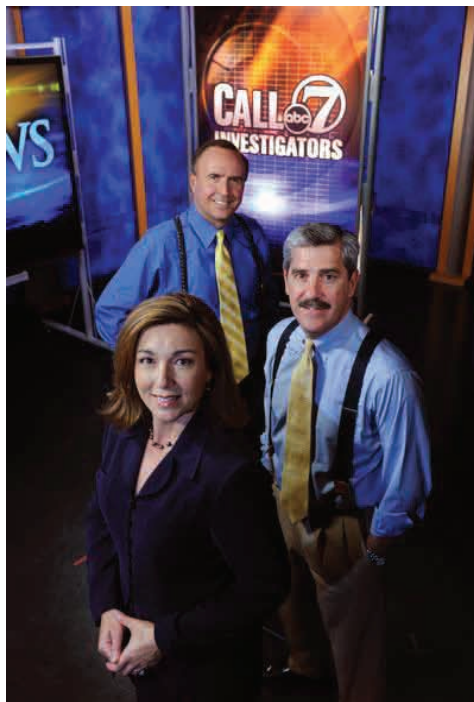
Investigative reporter Tony Kovalski was hired in 2001 to partner with Ferrugia, who has been with the station since 1992. Kovalski acknowledges that TV habits change slowly.

"Channel 9 had a long term of consistency, and they have a great base of viewers. When Byron (Grandy) came through the door, he wanted to take this to a higher level and have two investigative reporters," he said. "The focus is content and accountability, not what's it going to bring ratings-wise. Byron believes eventually the marketplace will see the superior work we're doing. It's not going to come in a week, a month or a year."

Channel 7's stories arise from sources and instinct, Kovalski said, and "also from trusting viewers who say, 'Something's wrong, these are the people we need to call to get it fixed.'" Theresa Marchetta joined the team in 2003 after a stint at KCNC-Channel 4 and concentrates mainly on consumer stories.

### Content and quality

Despite having a newsroom staff 20 percent smaller than that of Channel 4 and Channel 9, and having notably less marketing muscle, Channel 7 has emerged as the station to beat in terms of content and quality.



KMGH-Channel 7's top investigative reporters are Theresa Marchetta, Tony Kovalski, top, and John Ferrugia. The station's investigative team has been winning many of the top awards, putting the station on the map nationally. (Helen H. Richardson, The Denver Post)

**"They are major players (at KMGH) year after year after year."**

Phil Williams, noted reporter in Nashville, Tenn.

This week, for the first time, KMGH won the regional Emmy Award for overall station excellence. Previously, rival KUSA-Channel 9 routinely claimed that honor.

At Saturday's ceremony, Channel 7 also scored Emmys in all the top news categories: investigative series, speciality-assignment series, 10 p.m. newscast, breaking news, weather anchor (Mike Nelson) and news anchor (Marchetta's local election coverage). The team of Ferrugia, Kovalski and Marchetta — with producers Art Kane and Tom Burke and photojournalist Jason Foster — keeps racking up honors: five investigative Emmy wins in five years.

More impressive, their investigation last spring into the deaths of children under the protection of the Denver Department of Human Services won the George Foster Peabody Award, broadcast journalism's Pulitzer Prize equivalent. That year-long effort led to an overhaul of the department.

In 2004, the station won broadcasting's other coveted prize, the Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Award for its investigation "Honor and Betrayal: Scandal at the Academy," about the Air Force Academy's pattern of sexual abuse of female cadets.

Fallout included a change in leadership at the AFA and a broad review of similar military academies. Ferrugia's 2008 documentary on the Platte Canyon High School shooting, a 2004 expose on Zicam nasal spray and Kovalski's 2005 report on Volvo problems continue to draw comment.

Journalists around the country are taking note. Mark Greenblatt, a Denver native and investigative reporter at KHOU in Houston, is regularly in competition with KMGH for national honors.

"Those are some of the top-notch investigative reporters in the country that they have under one roof at Channel 7," he said.

Greenblatt's concerns are far-reaching: "With stations hacking away at investigative units all over the country, I believe they are hacking away at democracy. I really believe that."

Noted investigative reporter Phil Williams, on the board of the Missouri School of Journalism's Investigative Reporters and Editors and a fixture at the CBS affiliate in Nashville, Tenn., marvels at the consistency of the KMGH unit. "They are major players year after year after year," he said. "There are pockets of good news like that across the country, but they are hardly the norm. It's rare that you have news management that 'gets it' the way management there does."

The unit's support extends to the top of the company. McGraw-Hill chief executive Terry McGraw has singled out the Channel 7 watchdogs for praise and fiscal backing. "People in New York understand what's happening here and support it," KMGH news director Jeff Harris said.

The appointment of Harris, former executive producer of the investigative unit, as news director underscores the station's priorities.

"We're continuing to build and invest in the Call7 Investigators at a time when many stations are disbanding these units around the country and even in town," Harris said. "Our station is expanding it."

This fall, when NBC remakes its prime-time slate and its business model by putting Jay Leno on locally at 9 p.m., the ratings race is likely to be in flux. As the audience gives the remote a workout, sampling can only benefit Channel 7's 10 p.m. newscast.

"We have a strategy that would be there no matter what NBC is planning," Harris said.

KMGH will stick to doing the real work. After all, they've raised expectations.