

New TPT CEO took the reins of TV station, then Covid-19 hit

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Sylvia Strobel took the helm of Twin Cities Public Television on Feb. 17 and had about a month in the PBS station's St. Paul office before Covid-19 sent most of the staff home.

The good news for Strobel is that she already knew a lot about the station, having interned at TPT and later worked there as deputy corporate counsel in the mid-1990s.

She also knows public broadcasting. She has 25 years experience in public media, with her most recent job as chief operating officer at Ideastream, the public radio station in Cleveland.

She recently spoke to the Business Journal about her new role at TPT. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

You had less than a month on the job and then Covid-19 hit. What were you doing for those first few weeks when things were normal? And then when things changed, what did you do?

This was not on my 100-day plan. If anything, this pandemic has clarified our priorities as a public media organization.

I'm fortunate in that I've worked in public media for almost 30 years. And we've got an amazing board of directors at TPT, a really talented staff, some of whom I knew from my first time at TPT, when I was an intern 30 years ago. So I'm very fortunate to have that kind of support. I didn't walk into this cold. I also have a lot of great public media colleagues around the country, and we really serve as a support network for each other.

At the end of the day, all of these challenges we've been undertaking are going to lead to a lot of innovation. I'm just really amazed at the TPT team, which has stepped up. They've always been stellar, but really ramped up programming. We've got a new local Covid-19 special that's been airing after Almanac every Friday night. We were one of the first public TV stations in the country to go live with special Covid coverage. And we offered it in English, Hmong, Spanish



NANCY KUEHN | MSPBJ

Sylvia Strobel is the new CEO of Twin Cities Public Television.

and Somali.

I'm getting to know everybody on Zoom and Teams and Webex.

How many employees work at TPT and did you get a chance to meet them all in person before Covid?

We have around 200 employees. We had a meet-and-greet my first day, which was a big blur. I think I met most of them. But no, I didn't get a chance to meet all of them in person. But I will say, there is something about this virtual world that I've probably got to spend more time in deep, strategic conversations with folks that might not have happened had we been in the office.

Covid presents challenges that you could not have foreseen coming into this job. TPT relies pretty heavily on memberships and donations. Have you felt any pain from that yet?

Like most businesses, we've seen revenue decrease at a time when we've really ramped up services. Our staff's working more than ever. But we have had to make some difficult decisions. In April, we eliminated four senior-level positions and the executive team's annual compensation was reduced by 15% to 20%. We've got a hiring freeze in place. Some of our team that maybe worked on field production work, they can't really do that now. We've moved them over to assist with some of our public affairs programming around Covid-19.

Tell me more about yourself. You went to St. Olaf and the University of Minnesota. Are you from here?

I grew up in Missouri and moved up here for college. But my husband is born and bred in the Twin Cities. But this is definitely home and even though I was working in Cleveland and public media before coming to TPT, we actually just kept our place here [in St. Paul]. We knew we'd be back. This is where my kids consider home.

Most of your career has been in public broadcasting. Is that something you wanted to do from an early age?

I was pre-med in college, and kind of realized at the last minute that I couldn't stand the sight of blood. So I needed a different career path. I went to law school straight out of college thinking I would do something in health law or environmental law. And by pure happenstance I saw a posting for a law clerk at Twin Cities Public Television, and thought, "Wow, that sounds like a lot more fun than some of these other jobs." I got [the job], and the rest was history. I was just hooked. I have loved every minute of it.

Sylvia Strobel

Age: 54

Education: Bachelor of Arts, biology, St. Olaf College; Juris Doctor, Mitchell Hamline School of Law; MBA, University of Minnesota

Family: Married, two kids ages 19 and 23

Hobbies: Strobel grew up on a farm and loves to garden. She also enjoys travel, particularly educational travel.

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