



# Sandler Exits the Fast Lane

*Becomes Program Director of KTAO-Taos, N.M.*



Nicole & Alison party at the Taos Halloween bash.

## By Dave Einstein

**N**icole Sandler left Los Angeles a month ago to pursue a dream of a simpler life for herself and her recently adopted daughter Alison. The typical concerns of parenthood—schools, daycare, and healthcare—weighed heavily on her as she wrestled with her radio/Internet program director career options.

Sandler had been caught in a recent downsizing of WorldClassRock.com (WCR), an Internet-only Triple A music channel originally designed to be the website for Channel 103.1, Los Angeles' most recent commercial Triple A casualty.

Channel 103.1 was purchased and later spun off by Clear Channel when the merger with AMFM was completed in 2000. At that time, Nicole convinced Clear Channel to continue the station as an Internet-only website, but inevitable cutbacks came in the following year. Then Sandler's challenge became continuing her major market career path—or maybe it didn't.

Radio careers usually start at independently owned small market stations and then move to larger markets with corporate owners; but not so with Sandler's. She was in LA for 14 years with stints at KLSX, and KMX/FM except for eight months in San Diego at 91X, and before coming to the West Coast she was in New York for five years at WMCA and WPLJ.

**DAVE EINSTEIN:** What made you decide to leave the big city for Taos?

**NICOLE SANDLER:** I got tired of fighting to prove that Triple A is a viable format in LA, even though I believe that it can work there. Like any format, it needs to be done properly and with the right marketing tools, which hasn't happened yet with commercial radio. Secondly, I now have a daughter. Priorities change.

I also felt like I'd done the big city thing. I've lived and worked in New York and LA and I grew up and went to school in South Florida. I've never lived in a small town and I've been intrigued by Taos because of its strong arts community, visual beauty and spirituality.

"I've always had this fantasy about working at KTAO. It's always had the reputation of being a really cool station. I met Brad [Hockmeyer, owner of KTAO] at different conventions over the years. After I left WorldClassRock.com I was going through the employment listings online and in the trades and I noticed that Brad was looking for a morning show person/APD, and I thought this would be perfect. I called him and he was into the idea and said if I was really interested, he'd turn the programming over to me. I flew out with my daughter for about five days and checked it out and thought "this could work." KTAO is truly is part of the local community fabric. It's what radio was originally designed to be. It's the community voice.

**You've only been there a month—what are some of the differences you've seen in programming styles?**

Well, KTAO has a show on daily from 10:10-10:30 a.m. called *Trash and Treasures*. It's extremely popular and was one of the first things I was drawn to when I came to visit. You couldn't get away with that in a larger market, but here it works. Somebody will call in and say, "I've got a '67 Chevy Impala I'm selling for parts, I want \$500, here's my phone number." The next call will be someone who found a dog, and the phones don't stop ringing for the entire time that it's on. There's something very compelling about it. It seems to be as effective on the air as Ebay is on the net.

We also do a birthday club on Fridays where people send in messages to their friends and loved ones and register to win a cake at Baskin Robbins. For Halloween, parents were invited to bring their kids up here and we had a costume contest, took

pictures of all the kids, and gave out prizes.

In LA we didn't expect kids to be listening; we targeted adults. Kids listen to KTAO so we have to be sensitive to lyric content. At KSCA and Channel 103.1 in LA we made a point of *not* playing an edit of a song.

And news is an important component of KTAO—Taos has only a weekly newspaper, and no local TV. For many, we're the main source of daily information, so we cover everything from local happen-

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ings to national and international news. The "Hometown News" segments on this station consist largely of community events that would be considered PSA material in a major market; probably not even considered news. Here, it's relevant to the audience. Our news and features create a much longer TSL than I even had at either LA stations.

**The differences in advertising and live appearances must be totally different as well.**

Advertisers will sometimes want to be the voice on their own spots. In a major market there's usually a production fee for that service, but here it's all part of the package. There really isn't enough revenue available in a market this size to hit them with a production fee, so that means more of a production load for the staff. Talent fees for appearances are nonexistent. That part is very different.

**Will you miss the sophistication of LA?**

Taos is a small town but it's not a "hick" town. A large part of the population has come here from LA, San Francisco, and Denver to escape the big city madness. Taos is sophisticated and has a healthy and thriving arts culture, and I'm very excited to be part of it.

In the final analysis, this will either be the best thing I've ever done or it will turn out that I'm a city girl and this will be a great learning experience. It could be the perfect thing for me, or it could be just a stop a long the way, but I had to find out. ■