

Two liberal talkers are off the air

By JOHN THOMASON | Forum Publishing Group
September 11, 2008

Liberalism's voice in South Florida just got a couple of notches softer.

Nicole Sandler and Jim DeFede, two of the area's strongest progressive voices, recently disappeared from the talk radio airwaves within a day of each other. DeFede quit the largely conservative WFTL-AM (850) Aug. 21 after the station bought out the remaining 14 months of his contract. Sandler was let go from the liberal WINZ-AM (970) Aug. 22.

The absence of Sandler and DeFede leaves the area with only one major local political voice – centrist Joyce Kaufman at WFTL (unless you count WQAM's Neil Rogers). Both talkers covered the national news of the day as well as topics of interest to South Floridians, from the housing crisis, Indian casinos and hurricanes to local elections and breaking crime stories.

Listeners won't get the local angle from Sandler's replacement in the 6 to 9 a.m. time slot, notorious shock jock Don Imus. It's a transition her loyal audience has not welcomed.

"Nicole was always well-prepared and researched whatever topics she and her audience were discussing," said Diane Lawrence, president and co-founder of the South Florida Impeachment Coalition. "Not only did she talk about this ridiculously endless presidential campaign, but she discussed the problems of our underfunded schools and various state and local officials.

"Talk radio all over this country is dominated by right-wing conservatives," she added. "Why would WINZ want to kill the only local progressive voice we have here? I'm sure it's all about money, but if they bother to research the number of people listening to their station between 6 and 9 a.m., they will find that Imus' audience is extremely small."

Barbara Walters, fundraising director for the Miami-Dade activist group Democracy for America, said she stopped listening to WINZ when she learned of Sandler's dismissal.

"Once I found out that the change had taken place, I immediately changed the dial on the radio and will not tune in again," she said. "I told [programming coordinator] Ken Charles in an e-mail that as far as I'm concerned, WINZ no longer exists."

Charles, who programs the conservative talk station WIOD-AM (610) as well as the liberal WINZ, defended the choice of Imus but said he understood the concerns of angry listeners.

"We've gotten e-mails and phone calls from both sides – more negative e-mails than positive ones, which is not a surprise," he said. "Change is hard in everything. And this is worse, because people become attached to personalities, whether it's Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, Stephanie Miller or Ed Schultz. You hope that you made a change for the positive. There may be four hours you don't like a lot on the station, but we hope that you listen to the 20 hours of radio that you do like."

But why Imus, who has a history of racist and sexist comments and hardly embodies the progressive movement?

"There are few options for progressive programming," Charles said. "Air America is the best option, but in the morning they do a repeat of Ron Kuby from the night before. We wanted something live, and even though Imus is not a Schultz or a Thom Hartmann, he's also not a Limbaugh or a Hannity. He's an equal-opportunity offender. I've heard him say things about both sides of the aisle, and he still gets great guests."

Charles wanted to assure his audience of liberals that Imus will not start the station down a slippery slope toward more centrist broadcasting.

"This is not a change of the radio station," he said. "Thom Hartmann, Stephanie Miller, Lionel, Alan Colmes – these guys aren't going anywhere."

Sandler aims to remain a force in South Florida, even if she has to take her commentary to the Internet. A radio veteran of nearly 30 years, she had started a Web site to broadcast the hundreds of interviews she'd done with celebrities such as [Dave Matthews](#), [Ray Davies](#) and [Jackson Browne](#). Three days after being fired by WINZ, she re-launched the site, titled Radio or Not (radioornot.blogspot.com), as a podcast, commenting on the Democratic and Republican conventions.

Although she believes Internet radio is the future, she would prefer to be on terrestrial radio again, even if it means waking up at 4 a.m. every weekday.

"The fact that we lost our voice on the eve of the Democratic Convention is a travesty, and it's further proof that we need the Fairness Doctrine back," Sandler said. "Corporations are controlling the public airwaves."

DeFede, meanwhile, who used to occupy Sandler's former WINZ time slot, left WFTL's afternoon drive-time show abruptly and of his own volition.

"I had been frustrated with the station for months and finally had my agent contact the station a month before I left, telling them I wanted out of my contract," said DeFede, a former *Miami Herald* writer who now works as a reporter and commentator for [CBS-4](#). "Once we reached a deal for them to buy me out, there was no reason for me to stay on the air any longer. I was willing to finish out the week, but they decided we should just break immediately."

WFTL programming coordinator George Johns said he wasn't surprised by DeFede's resignation.

"I think Jim couldn't handle the fact that a whole bunch of the other shows seemed to be conservative and he's fairly liberal," Johns said. "The other hosts didn't have a problem, but he was uncomfortable from the very beginning."

"I thought Jim was a hell of a talent – his style and his passion and all that. But he always seemed to lock horns with general management. It's too bad; he was entertaining."

WFTL's audience leans to the right, and its response to DeFede's departure was not as heated as the one that greeted the change at WINZ. Johns said listeners may prefer the new lineup.

"Because most of the station is conservative, they wanted us all to be conservative," he said. "Now we've gone to a news block [from 5 to 6 p.m.], which was a no-brainer for an hour. We had had cut back Bill O'Reilly, and that caused more flak than anything. So we gave him back his other hour and moved [Michael] Savage up."

Johns said he has no political ideology and would welcome a new local voice on his station, even if it were a progressive voice.

"If another local talent comes along, I'd give it serious consideration," he said. "This hasn't ended the quest for what we're trying to do, which is go local as much as we can."

For full schedules and station information, visit www.supertalk940.com and www.850wftl.com.