



DINING

HOMELIFE

MIKE HOLFELD

Making a Difference in Seminole County

If WKMG's Mike Holfeld looks confident unraveling a mystery or reporting the latest scam, it may be because he's doing precisely what he has always wanted to do. "I've known since I was five years old that I wanted to be in news," Mike says. "I know that sounds crazy, but at that age I would interview my brothers and sisters with a tape recorder. I didn't know what news was, but for some reason I gravitated to it."

The oldest of five children, Mike was born in New York City in 1954. He got the performance bug from his mother, Joan Borghese, a graduate of Julliard and a nationally known opera singer who performed not only with the New York Opera but also with the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra, and was a winner on TV's *Arthur Godfrey Talent Scouts* (an

early precursor of shows like *American Idol*). She met Mike's father, W. T. Holfeld, a pianist, in New York—on stage during a performance of *Carmen*. A top researcher at DuPont, Dr. Holfeld was Mike's mentor, coaching him in public speaking from the fifth grade on. In fact, in high school, Mike made it to the finals in national oratorical contests two years running, representing his home state of Delaware.

At 17, Mike went into radio, doing newscasts at a local top-40 station. From there he went to Philadelphia as Michael Scott Buchanan on WPEN. And at 21, as he was finishing his degree at the University of Delaware (majoring in—what else?—communications and TV



Mike and Lisa Holfeld

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production), he took his first shot at television.

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— Mike Holfeld

Mike had participated in a University program that gave students the opportunity to produce a newscast on a local cable station. When it was Mike's turn, he was both executive producer and one of the anchors. He took his tape to Rich Friedman at station KYW in Philadelphia, and Friedman liked what he saw. He let him go on the set at KYW and make a tape, which Mike later took to the New Jersey Public Television network and landed his first job in television news. After New Jersey, he went on to TV newsrooms in Providence and Baltimore as reporter and anchor before landing at WXYZ in Detroit. As the station's national correspondent for a rewarding 15 years, he worked alongside the legendary Bill Bonds, long considered one of the country's best anchors. It was at XYZ that Mike matured into the seasoned reporter that he is today.

It was also while he was at XYZ that he met his wife, Lisa. After dating for six months, they were married in 1986. As Mike's role and responsibilities at the station grew, so did his time away from home. This unwelcome development was one reason he ultimately decided to leave XYZ—but it wasn't the main reason. Basically, it came down to the weather. "I couldn't take the cold and the snow anymore," he says. "I was driving down Northwestern Highway and there was ice on my windshield. I was hanging out of my window, slamming my windshield wipers, trying to get the ice off, and I said, 'This is the last year.'"

Planning a move

The decision to leave Detroit wasn't easy—after all, he had spent most of his career there—but it was even more difficult for Lisa. She was born in Detroit, grew up in nearby Royal Oak, and had spent her entire life in the area. They agreed that if they were going to move, it should be to a place friends and family would want to visit. That meant a warmer climate, and a variety of things to do. It had to be a good place to raise a family, including excellent schools. To Mike, Atlanta seemed to fill the bill. An aunt and uncle of his lived there, so there was a family connection; and it was one of the top 10 television markets in the country, so it also made sense from a professional standpoint.

Problem Solvers: The Tallahassee Connection

HOUSE BILL 893: REGULATION OF MOVING INDUSTRY

This bill makes it illegal for a moving company to fail to honor all provisions of the moving contract. Also, the bill makes it illegal to charge clients more than 10 percent above the estimated cost; and to withhold delivery of household goods against the customer's

And then Post-Newsweek called. A surprise? Yes indeed: Post-Newsweek operated WDIV in Detroit—Mike’s competition. He already knew the station’s management, Alan Frank and Henry Maldonado—the same Henry Maldonado who is now VP and general manager at WKMG. As competing news operations, they had gone head-to-head for 15 years. And now Post-Newsweek wanted Mike to leave town. Destination: Orlando.

Intrigued by their offer, Mike went to Orlando to look around and hear what they had to say. What they said was, “We want you to help us go to the next level.”

Mike liked the Orlando area in general and Seminole County in particular, but he also needed to see if the area was family-friendly. And so, in April of 1999, Mike initiated his own investigative report. He investigated neighborhoods, homes and schools. Mike and Lisa didn’t know exactly what they were looking for, but they did know that quality education was number-one on their list. The schools they visited didn’t know that he was a reporter

from Detroit, of course; but they welcomed him. He toured Bear Lake Elementary, Teague Middle, and Lake Brantley High School, and was impressed with the teachers and their desire to make sure the kids do well.

In short, Mike was wowed by the schools. And so he, Lisa and the girls moved down from Detroit and settled into a beautiful Bear Lake home.

Local hero

When Mike arrived at WKMG, David Whitman and Lisa Colagrassi were the 6:00 news anchors, and Mike did the 5:30 broadcast. Ratings were good, but management wanted to do something beyond the “There was a fire, here’s the weather, here’s the sports” way of presenting the news. To that end, they created the “Problem Solvers” concept, a blend of investigative reporting and conflict resolution for consumers that’s continues today.

Mike had done many consumer and business-oriented investigations in the past, but Maldonado and News Director Skip Valet didn’t want to

wishes.

HOUSE BILL 89: THE STEPHANIE SABOOR GRIEVING PARENTS

ACT This bill requires a licensed health-care practitioner to notify a mother who has suffered a miscarriage (“spontaneous fetal demise” at less than 20 weeks) of her options: arrange for burial or cremation of the remains, or allow her physician to dispose of the remains by means customarily used.

THE HOTEL-MOTEL PROPERTY TAX AMENDMENT

This amendment provided a tax extension for hotels and motels facing lost revenue in the wake of the 911 attacks.

limit him: anchoring the news is time-consuming and limited, and wouldn't get Mike where he wanted to go professionally. So he made the transition to investigative reporter: one of the Problem Solvers.

“We have talented people on the desk right now, and we have talented people reporting in the general assignment ranks,” he says. “But the four of us in the Problem Solvers are some of the best reporters, I think, in the country.” He has nothing but praise for his colleagues: Tony Pipitone is gifted, he says: “He can produce at any network he wants.” Wendy Saltzman is “creating a niche since she made her splash with the Lynx investigation.” And Steven Cooper, who has exposed numerous cases of consumer fraud, “launched a national investigation into outsourcing which has basically become the matra for [both] Kerry and Bush.” he says. “Another person on the team who deserves mention is executive producer Tim Arnheim. He has creative skills that add the finishing touch to many of our projects. He's one of the behind-the-scenes people like photographers and editors that never get the credit they deserve.”

“Mike is not just interested in being a great TV reporter. He wants to improve the quality of his community through his work. If we had more politicians like that, the world would be a much better place.”

— Rep. Randy Johnson

In addition, he says, “we've done something that no television station has done: Not only have we isolated problems in the community, we've created laws.” Six have been passed since 1999, including one regulating furniture movers, and another for parents grieving an in-hospital miscarriage. In addition, the Problem Solvers' spotlight on violence in video games sold to minors helped influence Best Buy to voluntarily check buyers' IDs. In each case, with the support of elected officials such as state representatives Randy Johnson and Sherry McInvale.

“If you told me five years ago that I was going to change laws, I wouldn't have believed it,” Mike says. But he and the Problem Solvers did, and the station was recognized in both the House and Senate in Tallahassee, and Mica lauded Mike on Capitol Hill and recommended him for a Peabody Award, the top prize in TV journalism. “Now we're working on future legislation. That's what makes the Problem Solvers so different.”

While some of their news stories begin with a lawmaker approaching Mike with a concern, Mike has also established rapport with several state representatives in Tallahassee. If he has a problem, he'll send them a tape and say “I think we have a problem,” and they'll present those stories to other legislators in Tallahassee. In fact, Problem Solver reports have been played in sub-committee more than any other TV station. And when the sub-committees see these tapes, they act.

“I know it sounds like common sense, but common sense isn't there all

the time,” Mike says. “You and I probably assume there are checks and balances, but no. A lot of times our investigations find there’s a problem, there’s no law there to protect us, so it’s a simple addendum to existing laws or its changing laws,” he says. “Every other TV station will report the problem; Local 6 will come up with a solution. Sometimes . . . [we try] diplomacy first. We’re strong believers in diplomacy,” Mike says.

Mention the name Mike Holfeld to Rep. Randy Johnson, and the first words you’re likely to hear are “He’s a hero of mine.” Johnson says his and Mike’s relationship began when they worked together to get organized crime out of the moving industry.

“This illustrates the very best of what a relationship should be between the government and media,” Johnson says. “Government, while powerful, has only a certain set of tools. The media, too, is limited. But when you put them together, you can communicate a very compelling argument for change.” Mike and Local 6 in general “think in a different environment. They really want to make a difference . . . find legitimate problems, and work with government to fix those problems,” he says.

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News from home

Earlier this year, NBC called Mike to say they wanted him as a correspondent in Chicago or Los Angeles. He turned them down. “I decided I wanted to make a commitment to this community, but first and foremost, to my wife and kids,” Mike says, “because if I had said yes to that, it would have meant being on an airplane most of my life. Many of my friends are in the business—Mike Huckman’s with CNBC, Shelly Smith is with NBC, Chris Hansen is with *Dateline*. We’re all close. We don’t talk to each other like we once did, but I see what they’re going through, and it’s a tough life.” Mike is committed to staying in Central Florida and WKMG because feels he can make a difference.

When Mike first arrived, the Orlando television market was 23rd in the country; it’s now in the top 20 and considered a major market. “Coming from Detroit, a major market, and having seen [Orlando] evolve over the past five years, I would put this market up against any market in the country,” he says. The station has just signed him to a four-year contract, and he’s more than happy at WKMG. “I’m at a place that wants me, we’re on the same wavelength, and it’s a sort of a family feeling with this professional edge,” he says. In fact, he and news director Skip Valet joke that “we’re going to retire here, because we love what we do and we want to make our mark,” he says.

“The Central Florida area is growing,” he says. “This is going to be the place to be in the next ten years, and we’re going to be a part of it. I’m

bursting at the seams.”

He describes WKMG as a station with youthful exuberance. “[We’ve] got Henry Maldonado, who is this forward-thinking general manager, [and] Skip Valet, who’s aggressive and accepts nothing but excellence,” not so much a “We’ve got to win” pressure, but more like “Don’t worry . . . we’re gonna get there.”

If for some reason the station were to move in a radically different direction, Mike may move in a new direction himself. “I’ve done so much with the Problem Solvers and learned how lawmakers work, I would definitely consider going into public office,” he says. “I’ve discussed this with Randy Johnson and Sherry McInvale, and the support would be there . . . If the timing were right, I would definitely consider working to represent Seminole County.”

But for now, Mike’s a dedicated newsman. Maldonado will sometimes ask Mike, “Are you happy? Just keep doing what you’re doing.” You bet. “I haven’t been happier in my life.” **S**

Bill Ernst is the publisher of Seminole magazine.

Teaming Up: The Problem Solvers and *Seminole* magazine

Starting with the next issue, Mike Holfeld and other Local 6 Problem Solvers will contribute to a regular column to discuss one of their ongoing investigations that impact Seminole County and all of central Florida. “I think it’s tremendous,” Mike says. “On TV, we only have two and a half or three minutes. You really don’t get all the questions answered—things have to be edited out.” But with a regular column in this magazine as a forum, they’ll be able to expand on the key issues, “not only isolating the problem,” Mike says, “but also giving readers ways to defend themselves” against being ripped off. Everyone’s so busy, he says. “Maybe they didn’t see that [TV] report. But they’ll have *Seminole* magazine there.

I think it’s very important. I think it’s a great alliance, and we’re proud to be part of it.”

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