

Stories from a local media icon

By JOHN FOX
Staff reporter

If you have lived in Central PA for any amount of time it is likely you get a great deal of your local headline news from ABC 27 anchorman Rick Wagner. Wagner has been in the news business for over 30 years, the last 21 years of which he spent here in Harrisburg.

Wagner graduated from high school in Fairfield, California, in 1966 and after two semesters in college enlisted with the navy for a 4-year stint. Just before he was discharged, he received a brochure, from a friend, about broadcasting school. Compared to the heavy manual tasks he was doing in the Navy, broadcasting school sounded very interesting. He went to school in Minneapolis on the G.I. bill with the intent of becoming a disc jockey, thinking it would be "pretty cool" to play records. He took a news writing course where old newsmen came in and told war stories of talking to cops about the latest dead body found in the river and things of that nature. Immediately Wagner was intrigued and thought this kind of investigative reporting sounded even better than playing records.

His first job out of broadcasting school, in 1971, was as a newsroom grunt and staff announcer at a TV station in DeBuke, Iowa. Wagner learned a little bit of everything from processing and editing film to anchoring. He earned \$115 a week and had no health insurance but the job proved to be a valuable experience. After one year a small town radio station hired him as a newsman. At that time, television news was not that glamorous. For broadcasting, radio was still the hot medium. It was at this job where Wagner would live out the stories he heard in broadcast school. Everyday he would go to council meetings, zoning board hearings, and to the police stations and courthouses to see who got nailed for what, hoping to find a councilman who got into trouble the night before. He was on every day at noon, right after Paul Harvey, and frequently throughout the day with additional 5-minute newscasts.

After another year at this capacity, Wagner went back to Minneapolis and worked in a couple of news departments and learned a lot about the business aspects of radio. It was at this time that he realized that radio newsmen were a dime a dozen. This realization caused Wagner to seriously consider switching to television. "I thought I would have a better chance at sticking to the business in TV only because I didn't have a special gimmick," Rick reveals. "In radio, a great voice isn't

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enough. Back then, people like Paul Harvey did what's called color news, very hyped up, animated, and sensationalized. That's not part of my personality. I'm not a zany guy."

Nearly four years into the business, Wagner realized that there were still a lot of things he did not know. "When dealing with politicians and bigger stories it really helps to have that liberal arts background," Wagner said. He explained that the well-rounded benefit of such an education is crucial to piecing together facts and understanding the many facets of the subject matter in which he would be covering. With his desire to move to TV and realization of the need for more knowledge, Wagner decided to attend a community college in Minnesota, while he continued working part time in radio. After two years, he transferred to the University of Minnesota to major in history.

In his senior year, Wagner got an offer from a TV station in Springfield, Missouri, as the weekend anchor. The pay was great and he was working at the number one station in its market. The station wanted him to edit his own stories and it was here Wagner learned to go out and shoot what is called a *one-man band story*. Wagner would take a camera to the scene, shoot, come back to the studio and edit the videotape, write the script, and voice it. He remained the weekend anchor there for three years.

Nearly 20 years ago in New York, someone who worked in the same building, as the people who owned WHTM in Harrisburg, was vacationing in Missouri and saw

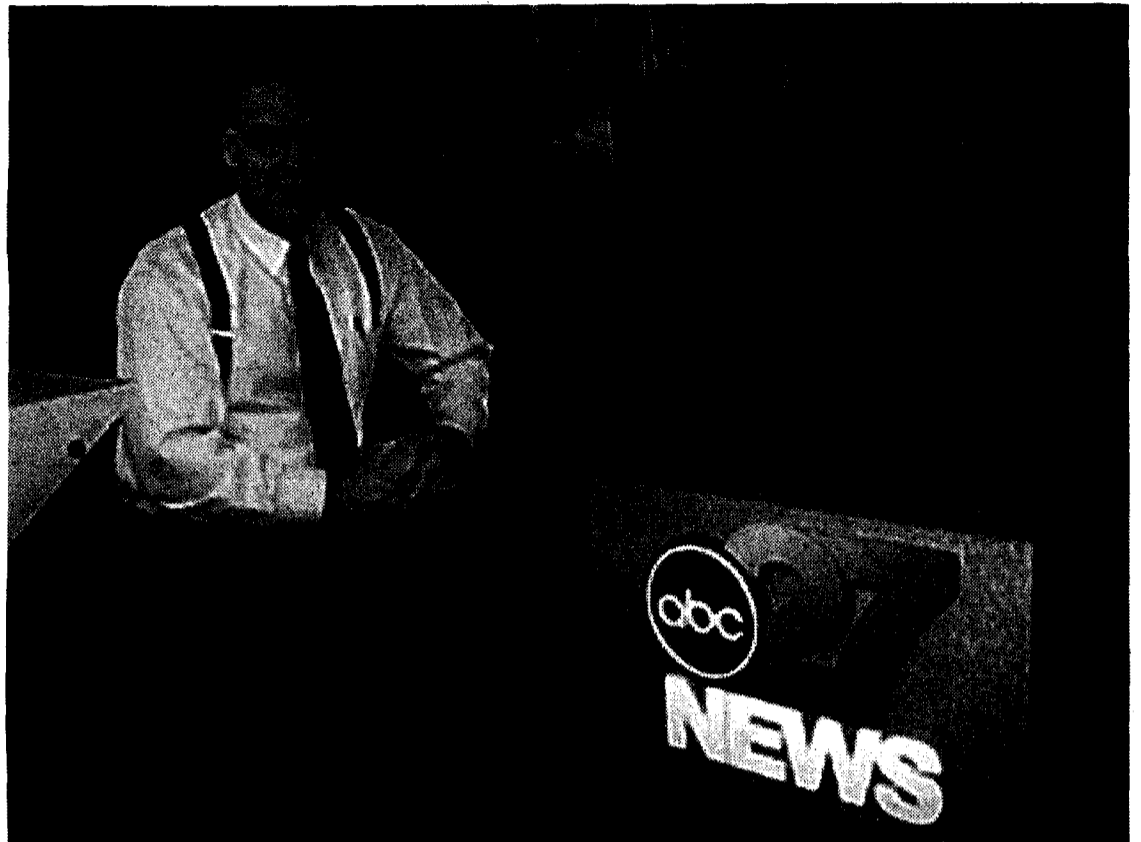


Photo by John Fox

Veteran news anchorman Rick Wagner poses on the set of ABC27. Wagner has been involved in television broadcasting for 30 years, including the last 21 in the midstate.

Wagner's broadcast. Knowing that the Harrisburg station needed an anchorman and liking Wagner's style, the man mentioned Wagner to the owners of WHTM. In March of 1982, shortly after meeting with the owners of this Harrisburg station, Wagner found himself accepting the job of full-time anchorman.

So, how does it feel to know that people expect to see your face on TV everyday and expect you to deliver the goods? "The celebrity factor is a mixed blessing," said Wagner. "People ask you to speak at events and expect you to have something profound to say. They think it's very glamorous but really it's just my job. It does affect your personal life in the sense that I can never get caught driving drunk."

"People are always watching and making conclusions about you based upon what they see. All in all, 99.9 percent of my experiences with the public are positive. At some point, in these last 23 years, I no longer feel like a visitor and I now call Harrisburg my home. This is where I'm from. It's a great feeling."

In 21 years of working in Central PA, Wagner has covered many momentous stories.

"The Bud Dwyer suicide in '86 was very intense," said Wagner. The Pennsylvania State Treasurer committed suicide at a press conference, caught on camera by WHTM, because of his recent conviction on corruption charges. "It was absolute chaos and pandemonium. Bud positioned himself right in front of our camera and the only reason we got it on film was because the photographer hit the deck in fear of getting shot."

Wagner also mentioned the 1989 Camp Hill Prison riot as an unforgettable story.

For those of you in college studying to become television journalists, Wagner outlines what a typical workday is like. "I'm in at 2:30 p.m. to talk to the 6 p.m. producer. I write a 4 p.m. news brief then have another meeting about the 6 p.m. news where we discuss and debate the stories, where to put them, and what's most important. Then if I'm not working on a story or returning phone calls, I start working on my copy. Everything that is going to come out of my mouth I look at because if it's dumb and it comes out of my mouth it's not the producer's responsibility, it's mine. Then at 4 p.m. we stop to talk about the 11 p.m. show, then back to copy. The 6 p.m. show is printed out at 5:30. Usually you have to be prepared for everything to change in the last 30 minutes. Breaking news and weather is our emphasis so if there is a tornado or thunderstorm that will take the lead and something will get bumped down. The whole shape of the newscast usually changes from 5:30 to 6 p.m., Wagner said.

It is clear that Wagner enjoys serving up news everyday for the Central PA area. He said that he has enjoyed being a part of the community and watching it grow over the last 21 years.