

Beam us up, Scotty, Texas is waiting for the news...

By Sondra Williamson

Some dreams make sense. You believe they can happen. Others are so outlandish that they seem like mere fantasies, flash-in-the-pan ideas marked by more foolishness than substance.

For more than ten years, Bob Rogers had a dream—a dream that began as a tiny seed in the fertile loam of his mind, an outgrowth of his rapt love for the TV news industry. A dream that at times seemed sensational yet continued to tap at the consciousness of this godfather of television news.

At a time when he had completed his career, when by rights he should have been relaxing in the hill country north of San Antonio with nothing more effortful on his agenda than reading a novel or lifting a golf club, Rogers rejected the tranquility of retirement to breathe life into the conjecture that had haunted him for a decade.

Enter Mike Arnold. A brash young industry upstart—a 28-year-old who hadn't yet lived as long as Rogers had lorded over his own TV news domain—a Generation X-er with experience that belied his years and enthusiasm that transcended the four-decade chasm separating him from his pre-Baby Boom mentor.

A wise old sage and an energetic young entrepreneur bound together by a common determination to transform a fantastic vision into reality.

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Bob Rogers and Mike Arnold sat at a conference table in the midst of clamorous construction noise, surrounded by the seemingly utter disarray of their new headquarters, and listened as members of the growing Texas Network (TXN) news organization cussed and discussed potential stories of the day.

At first impression, Arnold and Rogers appeared to be a study in contrasts—Rogers, the white-haired master, Arnold the raven-haired pupil. Rogers laid-back and soft-spoken, Arnold sitting bolt upright and moving quickly from one issue to the next.

Observing Arnold, however, it became apparent that he is no novice to the news industry. He began his media career early in life, editing and publishing newspapers in college, and hosted a live TV news program in Austin. After several years as a political media consultant, Arnold published an Austin-based investigative/political newsletter, *The Lone Star Report*, which led to his eventual co-founding of TXN, along with mentor Rogers.

At 8:05 in the morning, the conference room was filled with anticipation and verve. It was clear that this was no typical corporate meeting—no latecomers straggled into the room, groggily clutching their coffee cups, no one sat stiffly and stared out the window. Something electric was going on here. The room pulsated with a contagious excitement indigenous only to people who know they are breaking ground, doing something that matters, something that has never been done before.

“That’s the way we start every week,” Arnold, TXN’s Executive Vice President and COO, told me later as he led me through the maze of corridors that dissect TXN’s San Antonio headquarters. Along the way, he introduced me to various members of the news team and patiently explained the workings of towering banks of electronic equipment—a twinkling backdrop that one might easily mistake for the bridge of the *Starship Enterprise*.

Stepping out into the sunshine through a side door, we stood in the shadow of TXN’s enormous satellite uplink dish, the miraculous mechanism that beams up digitally transmitted news stories to a satellite orbiting 22,000 miles above the earth which, in turn, bounces them back down to the network’s waiting affiliate stations.

“We don’t hand out assignments like most news organizations do. Our people are so enthralled with what they’re doing—with what we’re doing together, as a team—that they come in every day with dozens of story ideas. In fact, we have more stories than we currently can bring to the screen, so we are compiling a bank of undated stories—stories that are ‘in the can.’ It’s every news organization’s dream.”

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The Texas Network, the first news network to report *purely* Texas news, is the brainchild of legendary television news pioneer Bob Rogers who came out of retirement to establish TXN. On January 18, 1999, after barely six months in existence, TXN sent up its first satellite signal to broadcast the syndicated all-Texas news program, *The News of Texas*. As of this writing, TXN has affiliate agreements with 22 stations in 19 of the 20 Designated Market Areas (DMAs) across Texas and is negotiating for a 23rd affiliate in Austin.

TXN produces ten shows daily—5:00, 5:30, 6:00, 6:30, 7:00 and 11:30 a.m.; 4:30, 5:00 and 6:00 p.m.; and 9:00 p.m. The network’s affiliates can broadcast one or more of the half-hour programs in full, or they can integrate segments of the programs into their own line-ups. Some affiliates broadcast several programs per day; for instance, the Houston affiliate runs four different full-length *News of Texas* programs daily—one each in the morning, midday, afternoon and evening time slots.

TXN gives Texas viewers, for the first time, a daily source of news specifically focused on events taking place in their home state—comprehensive statewide news coverage that heretofore has been a critically missing element in most local news broadcasts. In-depth news coverage that tells viewers not only what is happening, but how it affects them, both personally and professionally.

Rogers brought a wealth of experience to TXN, with more than 40 years in the television news industry, the last 27 of which he spent as Vice President of News for San Antonio’s KENS-TV. He left an indelible mark on the news operation at KENS, bringing the station from behind to garner first-place ratings in local news coverage for 25 consecutive years and establishing himself as one of the most successful figures in television news.

“I’m constantly called a ‘pioneer,’” Rogers told me when Arnold referred to him as such. Absent an introduction, I never would have guessed that this tall, lanky gentleman ambling through the hallways, chatting casually with staff, was TXN’s

President and CEO—the creator of the landmark news organization that was buzzing around me, growing by the nanosecond with hyperactive energy.

“I’m far from being the only pioneer here,” Rogers continued. “Take a look around—you’re surrounded by pioneers. We have the most incredible group of top-notch TV news people ever assembled.

“We have people on board who have years and years of network experience and others that are young and ambitious, the best in their field—anchors, reporters, photographers, videographers, technicians. When they heard about what we’re doing here at TXN, most of them left highly paid, secure jobs to return to Texas and their journalistic roots, simply for the chance to forge ahead in a new direction. Career-wise, they risked a lot to make this thing work. I regard every one of them as pioneers at the most personal level.”

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Rogers’ line-up definitely is impressive.

Take Greg Pasztor, TXN’s News Director, for instance, who has produced CBS News coverage of major events in Texas and across the nation, such as the Waco Branch Dividian siege, the Oklahoma City bombing trial of Timothy McVeigh and the TWA Flight 800 tragedy.

Or reporter Rita Trevino Flynn who has national news experience with both ABC and CBS News. Flynn served as ABC’s White House correspondent and was an alternate anchor for *ABC Early Morning News*, *ABC Weekend News* and *ABC NewsBrief*. At CBS, she covered the State Department, anchored *CBS Newsbreak* weekdays, and reported on national mid-term elections for *CBS Morning News*, *CBS Weekend News* and *CBS Sunday Morning*.

Flynn talked about how different her reporting experience with TXN has been than that with other stations. “The longer format is the backbone of the Texas Network,” Flynn said. “There is so much emphasis on quality and the substance of pieces. We do a lot of phone work, spend long periods of time shooting. I guess that’s it—we have the luxury of having the time to tell a story properly. When news hits, we hustle, do a lot of digging, research, talk to a lot of people. It’s the most rewarding reporting experience I’ve ever had.”

TXN reporter Dan Molina has an extensive background with Fox News Channel, including serving as the producer/trial analyst for the Oprah Winfrey-Texas beef industry trial. He has worked in documentary production for CBS News Productions and was a correspondent for NBC News in its Houston, Atlanta, Burbank and Chicago bureaus. For

several years, Molina served as CBS’ principal correspondent for NASA, covering the *Challenger* catastrophe and subsequent investigation.

Rogers also brought in top-notch news anchors. George McKenzie and Kym Bowman are teamed to comprise a uniquely qualified duo. McKenzie was a sportscaster at KMOL-TV in San Antonio for 12 years and is a three-time winner of “The Best Sportscast in Texas” award from the Texas Association of Broadcasters. Bowman is a former news anchor, reporter, producer and managing editor for KENS-TV’s Austin Bureau. She has been the recipient of journalism awards from various state and local

organizations, including the Texas Associated Press Award and the Sigma Delta Chi Award for Best News Feature.

TXN's second anchor team pairs Paul Alexander with Rosenda Rios. Alexander is a former sports anchor and reporter for KMOX-TV, St. Louis, and has reported and anchored for KTBC-TV, Austin, and KSAT-TV, San Antonio. Rios is a former anchor and reporter for K-EYE-TV, Austin, and KENS-TV, San Antonio.

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The whole concept of what Rogers, Arnold and their team are doing at TXN is pioneering in nature—their approach to the news, their timeline for bringing it to the viewer, their damn-the-torpedoes approach to getting things done. There are no established procedures here, no daily routine or map to get them from point A to point B. There's only proven performance, gut instinct and raw nerve.

"We're not yet totally up-and-running technologically, but we use what we've got and make it work," Arnold told me. "It will be several months before we're completely on-line with our digital technology; when our system's complete, though, we'll be the first totally digital broadcast news network in Texas, and possibly the nation. We'll also set a benchmark by being the first television newsroom to integrate the technologies of the Sony digital newsroom with those of the Associated Press' electronic news processing system [ENPS] server."

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The Texas Network is sinking an astounding \$10 million into a cutting-edge technology package that includes its Sony Digital Newsroom plus three DSNG satellite trucks and satellite uplinks outfitted by Shook Electronics USA, Inc., a San Antonio-based company. The system gives the network the world's most advanced technology combined with complete mobility. What that means is that TXN can get to the source of the news, produce a story, beam it to its affiliates and broadcast it to their TV audiences at lightning speed.

TXN's completely digital server-based newsroom and bureaus are being designed and installed by the engineers of Sony Broadcast and Professional Company. When completed by mid-1999, they will offer the most advanced technology available for remote acquisition, distribution and transmission of news broadcasts.

Currently, TXN straddles the line between analog and digital, using Sony digital cameras and editors in the field, as well as key Sony equipment components in the studio. Within a few months, the entire Sony system will be on-line. You can be sure that Rogers and Arnold heat up the telephone lines to Sony daily in order to keep the project on fast-forward.

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For now, TXN's half-hour news program, *The News of Texas*, is produced ten times daily in a gargantuan mobile production truck parked outside the network's permanent facility.

As Executive News Producer Bob Schadel guided me through yet another maze of corridors, we followed an incredible web of cables that led from the newsroom to the truck—cables small and large, multi-hued, clamped together at intervals and snaking along hallways, through portals, up, over and around furniture, equipment and walls and, ultimately, leading to a dock where the mobile production truck was parked.

Inside, the 11:30 a.m. *News of Texas* production was in full swing. It was dark and cool in the truck's interior, and we squeezed through narrow passages between walls of twinkling electronic equipment in order to reach the front of the truck. There, I watched in amazement as a crew of four manipulated a bank of buttons and knobs, flawlessly executing video, audio and graphics with precise timing. They worked from hand-held scripts that appeared to be written in some indecipherable hieroglyphic, and behind them on an elevated platform, producer David Davies oversaw the operation.

I was awed by everything I viewed, perhaps most of all by the relaxed demeanor of the people who performed these miracles before me.

"That's what you get when you hire the best people in their fields," said Schadel. "These people are veterans with trailblazing attitudes. Day-in and day-out, we're all re-writing the playbook, doing things that never have been done before. It's that kind of do-or-die atmosphere that keeps their blood pumping. That's why they're here at TXN and not back their old jobs."

Schadel is a perfect example of one of those founding fathers that make up the TXN team, with 30 years' experience in TV news in Texas, Oklahoma and Louisiana. An award-winning news professional, Schadel also had the start-up experience that Rogers and Arnold needed, having built the news department at KOKH-TV from the ground up with all-digital equipment.

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Back in his office, I asked Schadel to explain just what makes TXN's product different from the news programming of other stations.

“First, we let our stories breathe,” he said. “The average TV news story lasts 22 seconds; our stories run up to two minutes. Our reporting is investigative, in-depth, aimed not only at telling the viewer what is happening, but also what it means to them. How it meets them at their door.

“We don’t chase ambulances. You won’t see any stories about car crashes on TXN. We cover only breaking news that matters to a broad audience or that is sweeping in its magnitude. In selecting our stories, we think geographically, looking for stories that have universal appeal across Texas—north, south, east and west. There’s no formula, no other criteria.

“There are only a few states in which this format would work—Florida, California and New York come to mind, because of their size and diverse populations. Texas is a massive market. It’s actually bigger than the largest DMA in the country, New York City. We try to look for a story that will be equally as interesting to the person in the Valley as it will be to viewers in Dallas, El Paso and East Texas.

“We are able to blanket the state with our coverage because our technology is state-of-the-art and completely mobile. We’ve got sixteen crews operating in fixed digital uplink locations at bureaus in four major cities—San Antonio, Austin, Dallas-Fort Worth and Houston. All our affiliates have digital downlink capabilities, and we have three roaming DSNG digital uplink satellite vans that are used in live news and field production. We also have a direct Internet tie from the San Antonio bureau’s newsroom for Web-based access to video clips, plus multi-format facilities for legacy video.”

Schadel’s excitement builds as he talks about TXN’s phenomenal technology package. Eyes widened, tapping at the monitor on his desktop, Schadel beams when he says, “In a few months, all of our components—bureaus, affiliates, satellite vans, newsroom desktops—will be connected to a huge switchbox—the ‘mother-of-all-servers.’ Our reporters will be able to clip-edit video and copy it from the server, piecing stories together in minutes right at their desks.”

I asked Schadel if he believes that TXN is here to stay, if it will grow and endure with its revolutionary type of news programming.

“I have thirty years of journalistic ethics riding on TXN,” he said matter-of-factly. “Like me, everyone on our team feels a strong sense of ownership in this dream and a binding commitment to make it work. We’ve got everything we need—the financial backing, the technology, the experience and know-how, the product demand—to make TXN work. We’re proving that already, and our news organization will only grow stronger.”

As I left Schadel for my next appointment, I had no doubt he was right.

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The day I talked to Scott Ogren, TXN’s photojournalist and satellite wizard, he was at a park in Austin playing with his dog—and, at the same time, sending a news feed from there to the San Antonio headquarters.

“I just popped the dish up in the parking lot here, started sending the tape and, at the same time, began taking tape from San Antonio for a story later today,” he explained. “It’s a duplex feed, with no loss of quality at all. I don’t know any other satellite trucks

that can take in the quality of signal that our digital trucks can. No analog trucks can do it.”

Ogren’s enthusiasm about the technology was palpable. He reeled off accounts of innovative ways he has used the trucks faster than I could take even the sketchiest of notes. Ogren, whose TV career began in Iowa in 1976, was chief photographer for a Wichita, Kansas, station for a time, ran live trucks for KMOL-TV, San Antonio, and was a photojournalist for the Austin NBC affiliate. He set up the internal communications system for the Texas Lottery, where he did live shots of winners when they came in to claim their prizes, news releases and VNRs, editing and coverage of special events. Before joining TXN’s team, he took up freelance photojournalism, covering news and major productions for Showtime, ESPN and local bureaus.

His eagerness unabated, Ogren launched into another example of how the Sony technology has helped TXN surpass all industry standards for performance.

“It was one of our first days on-air, and we were covering the Governor’s inauguration. At one point, we had two crews editing at the truck on the Capitol grounds, and we were feeding our Lubbock affiliate at the same time, as well as taping the parade—doing four things simultaneously. In addition, KMOL/San Antonio’s satellite truck was out of order, and they were using our truck stationed at the Erwin Center for their feed.”

Ogren explained that TXN crews are able to perform these wonders because the Sony edit deck allows them to go portable and actually cover news at the scene without having to be limited by hitting offices. They use the truck as a portable newsroom, for live shots, feeds and to keep in contact with the network affiliate.

Having exclusive use of the satellite transponder allows TXN’s crews to do things that other satellite trucks cannot match. For instance, because the signal is divided into four pathways, they can send a signal up and take it down at will; each satellite van has a clear shot, day or night, to feed back to San Antonio or for San Antonio to feed to its affiliates.

Ogren told me about how this technology recently enabled him to help TXN’s Dallas affiliate get immediate on-the-scene coverage of breaking news regarding the San Marcos murder of a fraternity boy.

“I was in San Antonio just finishing up the afternoon feed and, at 6:00 p.m., we got word that something was coming down in San Marcos,” he said. “I drove the truck to the San Marcos Police Department and found out that the main suspect was dead. Because I was an experienced photojournalist and we had the technology of the truck, we were able to program it to send the story up on the main slice of the signal—the one all our affiliates watch and from which they receive feeds. Bottom line, KTVT in Dallas had video and a sound bite for their 10:00 p.m. newscast that other networks couldn’t have gotten to them.”

Ogren told me that every day in the field is a learning experience, that he continually is discovering new ways to use the Sony technology.

“We don’t have the timing problems that are inherent in analog trucks. We use digital beta tapes that have dual playback and dual editing capabilities, as well as being able to switch to a multi-camera shoot—all from a truck no larger than a Suburban.

“What this means is that this technology makes Texas a lot smaller for us in terms of our ability to cover the news. In effect, it puts the entire state in our back yard.”

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When I walked into Nanci Wilson's office, I felt sure I'd made a wrong turn somewhere. This place didn't look like any reporter's digs I'd ever seen. It could have been the office of a college professor, a scientist or an accountant, maybe, but not a reporter.

Yet, the door was clearly marked—it was the temporary home of TXN's Austin Bureau, headed by Jim Moore, the former Austin Bureau Chief for KHOU-TV/Houston. Nanci Wilson is an investigative reporter for the Texas Network. The bird dog of the TXN organization, you might say.

Wilson has worked in television and radio news for almost twenty years. Most recently, she was an Affiliate News Consultant for CBS New Media, working with CBS affiliates to integrate the use of the Internet into the newsroom. She has reported for KEYE-TV, Austin, anchored and co-produced for *Texas Entertainment News* and served as Executive Producer and anchor for the news department of KXII-TV, Sherman, to name only a few of her most recent accomplishments. Wilson has been the recipient of the Oklahoma Associated Broadcasting Excellence in Broadcasting Award, the Texoma Council on Aging Award for Focus on Elderly Issues, the American Legion Award of Excellence and Appreciation and numerous sales awards.

I looked around, and everywhere I saw stacks upon stacks of files. Not one, but two computer monitors on Wilson's desk, the surface of which was teeming with papers arranged according to some system that was, well, completely imperceptible. But, there was something reassuring about the disarray—a sense of controlled chaos. My eyes scanned the walls. There were several grease boards covered with the names of state agencies, diagrams, boxes and circles, all connected by an intricate highway of crisscrossing lines and arrows. At the top of one of the boards was written in large scrawling letters, "FOLLOW THE MONEY."

Welcome to the world of "database reporting," a term that aptly could be defined as "investigative reporting to the max."

Database reporting, according to Wilson, enables her to organize volumes of information in such a way that patterns and trends become obvious. When the data is sorted in various ways, she explained, pathways and questions emerge. Most reporters who pursue an investigation know what the story is when they begin the project. Wilson said that, by contrast, database reporting leads her to the story.

"I try to go for stories that affect a large number of people, stories that most stations don't have the time or resources to pursue," Wilson explained. "I use the power of the computer to pour through large amounts of information, to manipulate the records and find out exactly what's going on."

I asked for examples, and she gave me several.

As part of her ongoing investigation of the "citizen drug raids" in Elgin, a small city northeast of Austin, Wilson created a database comprised of information from all the affidavits and search warrants issued by the Elgin PD over the past three years—address, homeowner, race, officers involved, informant, probable cause, date and time of the incident. Sorting the data, Wilson noticed some puzzling patterns that she hasn't yet fully

interpreted. Her research was of such depth and magnitude, however, that it caught the attention of the U.S. Department of Justice, the FBI and the Texas DPS' Public Information Office, all of whom asked for copies of her initial report and for her assistance with their own investigations.

Wilson alluded to a story of major proportions on which she was working. The story deals with the possible misappropriation of public funds, but she could not reveal further details in case the story doesn't break before this article goes to press. The investigation is a massive undertaking, obviously, because most of the files, papers, charts and graphs surrounding her at the time pertained to this project alone. Since beginning her research eight weeks ago, Wilson said she has reviewed some 100,000 records trying to determine if the money in question is being handled legally and ethically—trying to “follow the money,” as she says.

“If you follow the money, you can usually find the problems,” said Wilson.

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At the end of my foray into the inner sanctum and workings of the new Texas Network, I felt a bit like an investigative reporter myself—armed with extensive data, but lacking the amenities of cutting-edge technology, extensive databases, or decades of experience to help me sort through all the information I had gathered about this venture within a only few days' time.

I did come away with the irrefutable impression that what is happening today at TXN is only the beginning. There is much, much more to come from this emerging force in the television news industry.

I have never encountered such ebullience and commitment among a group of people united in a common goal. From the CEO downward through all the ranks of TXN's staff—whether it be the marketing team or those who service affiliates, the producers, directors or anchors, the reporters or photojournalists, or the technicians and administrative staff—every single one of these people is dedicated to what they are doing in the most profound sense of the word.

As Mike Arnold told me at the outset of my assignment, and as every ardent member of his team confirmed—TXN literally is re-writing the playbook on television news programming. Around every corner and with each dawning, a new opportunity presents itself for TXN's incredibly talented, dedicated team of professionals to use their remarkable technology and unparalleled pool of talent to bring the news of Texas to its viewers more thoroughly and thoughtfully than it has ever before been presented.

Thanks to the Texas Network, I'd say all of our backyards just got a lot smaller.

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