

COMMENTARY

# The joke's on 97 Rock and juvenile jocks

By ANTHONY VIOLANTI  
*News Critic*

**S**he may have lost her job, but Jolene Baller still has a sense of humor.

"I never intended to be the poster girl for bad morning radio," Ms. Baller said with a laugh as she sat on the porch of the Allentown home she shares with her husband and 2-year-old son, Joseph.

Ms. Baller's life turned upside down during the past two weeks. The 97 Rock morning news anchor touched a national nerve this month when she walked off the air in protest of jokes about paralyzed actor Christopher Reeve.

Larry Norton and Marc Stout, the insensitive pair who make up WGRF-FM 96.9's morning team, hatched a comedy plot to do a bit about Reeve. Norton and Stout sent a couple of young staffers out on the street, one dressed as Superman, the other as a horse.

This was Norton's and Stout's idea of a joke; Reeve, who starred as Superman in the movies, was paralyzed after falling off

a horse on May 27.

It wasn't funny to Jolene Baller.

Her son, born prematurely, suffers from cerebral palsy and is unable to walk.

"They kept joking about Christopher Reeve and I kept thinking about Joseph," Ms. Baller, morning news anchor for the past five years, said in an emotional voice. "I know my son is going to walk someday, and also I know there's nothing funny about what happened to Christopher Reeve."

Norton, who was aware of Ms. Baller's son's condition, wasn't satisfied when she first refused to join in the fun on the air. He mocked her for not telling Reeve jokes and getting some laughs. Finally, Norton, who once cracked a joke about the death of Eric Clapton's infant son, put Ms. Baller in front of a microphone.

"I'm sorry, I can't be a part of such comedy," Ms. Baller said.

Those words echoed across America. The Buffalo News reported the incident and the story was picked up nationally by the Associated Press. Ms. Baller soon was contacted by national television networks,

syndicated TV and radio programs and publications around the nation.

People took notice because an ordinary citizen had the courage to speak out against the moral decay that permeates entertainment in the '90s. It has been a hot topic since President Clinton criticized talk radio extremists and Sen. Bob Dole blasted the film and record industries.

We expect politicians to do our moral bidding. The reality, however, is that entertainment values will never change unless we assume the responsibility ourselves. The hatred, sexism, cruelty and violence on radio, television, films and CD players can be stopped only one person at a time.

There's a price to pay to make that happen, and for Jolene Baller it was her job. She believes it was worth it. "I didn't think anybody would care when I did this, and I didn't do it for publicity," she said. "It was personal. I did it for my son and myself."

The response has been strong. The

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RONALD J. COLLERAN/Bufalo News

and her son, Joseph, 2, have vaulted into the

# Cruelty: Good riddance, Marc

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News received dozens of phone calls from all over the country supporting Ms. Baller. She also personally received many calls and letters.

"I have a tremendous amount of respect for her," said Tom Campbell, in a typical response from News readers. "She stood up and did the right thing at great personal cost.

"How many people do that these days? This was a clear-cut case of right and wrong, and she knew what was right. Jolene Baller is the kind of person who makes a difference, and maybe she can change radio for the better."

The incident apparently won't change 97 Rock. Ms. Baller resigned from the morning show, refusing to be part on the ongoing offensive comedy of Norton and Stout, who last month earned the station a \$4,000 fine from the Federal Communications Commission.

97 Rock management refused Ms. Baller's request to switch job duties or time slots. She had asked to work part time.

"I didn't feel that was a good idea," said John Hager, operations

manager of the station. "We don't have any need for her in that capacity."

Hager also pointed out that there were no complaints received at the station when the Reeve skit was aired. "It didn't bother our regular listeners," Hager said last week. "It was not meant to hurt handicapped people."

Charles W. Banta, a Buffalo native who heads Mercury Broadcasting Co., which took over ownership of 97 Rock two weeks ago, issued the following, edited statement defending Norton and Stout:

"The 97 Rock morning show does not serve the same function as the New York Times or a local TV newscast. The show's process is to entertain using humor and parody. In the process Larry Norton and his sidekicks will poke a little fun at almost anything and anybody, including themselves.

"Jolene Baller was part of the 97 Rock morning show for six years and had a pretty good understanding of what the show's brand of humor is all about. Jolene was not fired from 97 Rock and we did not ask her to leave.

"Apparently, she felt uncomfortable with one particular skit

and as a result, resigned her position. We respect her prerogative to do so, and we wish her well."

Norton remains on the air despite a fat contract and mediocre ratings. 97 Rock keeps hoping that maybe one day Norton will grow up to be Howard Stern. Stout, who somehow manages to sound more repugnant and ignorant than Norton, is leaving for a job in Denver. Good riddance.

Ms. Baller, meanwhile, is contemplating her future. "A job isn't everything," she said, standing in the afternoon sunshine as she played with her son. She pushed him on a small swing set. "C'mon, Joseph," she said, "be a good boy and go back and forth. You can do it."

Later, sitting down near a corner of the porch, Ms. Baller watched her son. Joseph has light blond hair, doe eyes and an irresistible smile. His head tilted to the side as he sat in the swing. A sly, gentle grin crossed his lips as he made eye contact with his mother.

"He's such a happy boy and such a brave kid," Ms. Baller said. "I want him to be proud of his mother."

# Buffalo isn't a trash bin

*Radio stations should stop treating it like one*

**F**ROM THE standpoint of a public increasingly fed up with offensive media tripe masquerading as entertainment, it matters little whether newswoman Jolene Baller walked away from WGRF-FM radio or was pushed.

What matters is that she took a stand against a station that seems to want to be known as radio's equivalent of the dirty book store, and whose top officials apparently are comfortable with that reputation.

Baller wasn't. She is gone from the station after refusing to help its disc jockeys make fun of actor Christopher Reeve, who was paralyzed in a recent horseback riding accident.

Making fun of human tragedy is the type of degenerative viciousness that is supposed to pass for humor today when the real thing is too hard to come by. It is just this station's latest bow to the lowest common denominator in the search for ratings dollars.

The station was recently fined for a vulgar routine about a woman having sex with a plunger. It has searched for humor in everything from the death of Nicole Brown Simpson to the supposed sexual perversions of Catholic priests.

It is not the only station that regards the Buffalo market as a receptacle for garbage wrapped in the First Amendment. WGR-AM, for example, became synonymous with hate radio instead of news before two of its more vulgar announcers left and a new

manager recently took over.

In fact, the vulgarity, racism, anti-Semitism and misogyny on Buffalo radio got so bad that a local coalition formed to monitor and even boycott offending stations.

What makes the WGRF-FM case different, however, is that someone from within was finally willing to act on principle.

It's a point of contention exactly how Baller — whose son's cerebral palsy made her especially sensitive to the Reeve bit — left the station. She says she was fired; the station says she quit.

Given the levels of integrity already shown by Baller and the station, respectively, observers would probably be safe in believing her side of the story.

But however the separation occurred, it stemmed from the fact that she was willing to take a stand over this issue.

It's too bad Buffalo native Charles Banta — whose company owns WGRF — operations manager John Hager and the rest of the station's top brass haven't demonstrated the same degree of integrity as Baller, whose departure has brought Buffalo more national attention.

When it comes to bad taste, no one is talking about government censorship. The issue is management responsibility and corporate citizenship. Buffalo deserves better, both from the stations themselves and from local advertisers that have to decide which stations they want their names associated with.

## Norton and Stout outrage community

Like Jolene Baller I, too, am the mother of an 8-year-old boy with cerebral palsy who cannot walk unaided, and I can't even begin to say how devastating it is to hear sick humor like what she protested. To use disabled people as the brunt of a joke is cruel and heartless.

The team of Larry Norton and Marc Stout should be banned from the airways. To continue to broadcast this type of garbage is a travesty. I hope Norton and Stout broadcast an apology for their behavior and give the disabled the respect they so deserve.

ROSEMARY PIETRASZEWSKI  
Amherst

### A cowardly act

It takes much courage to do what Jolene Baller did. It takes no courage to do what Norton and Stout do.

ANN JEWETT  
East Aurora

### Insult to humanity

How can a radio station like 97 Rock condone the actions of Norton and Stout?

To mock anyone's infirmities is an insult to humanity and surely the epitome of the evil that exists in the world today.

Anyone with any sense of decency and firm belief in God should be horrified that these two disk jockeys be allowed to get away with such virulent, un-Christian attacks on another's misfortune. I commend and



Jolene Baller and son Joseph.

praise Jolene Baller for her stand against these two, and I pray that she remains strong in her moral convictions.

MARGARET MARY SINDEL  
Hamburg

### Is it worth it?

I praise Jolene Baller and her stand against Larry Norton, Marc Stout and their sick humor at the expense of Christopher Reeves.

When people have to stoop that low to achieve humor, it just shows what low-lives they must be. Unfortunately, they are in a position where their "humor" reaches the public.

Evidently, 97 Rock and its owners must condone Norton and Stout's continual antics, and for what? Ratings? Publicity?

RUSSEL WHITMIRE  
Lockport

## RADIO

## 97 Rock anchor quits in anger

By ANTHONY VIOLANTI  
News Critic

Jolene Baller, news director at 97 Rock, walked off the air in protest last week after the station's morning team of Larry Norton and Marc Stout continued a comedy routine about injured actor Christopher Reeve.

Ms. Baller, morning news anchor for the past five years, resigned from the morning show but hopes to remain at the station.

Station officials at WGRF-FM 96.9 would not comment about her fate when contacted Monday. She has not worked since the incident.

Reeve, the star of "Superman" movies, was paralyzed from the neck down after falling from a horse May 27.

Norton and Stout took part in a comedy routine on Tuesday when 97 Rock sent a couple of staffers out on city streets. One was dressed as Superman and the other as a horse. They were getting comments from the public on Reeve, as Norton and Stout made jokes in the studio.

"I'm sorry, I can't be a part of that kind of humor," Ms. Baller said Monday. She is the mother of a 2-year son who has cerebral palsy and is currently unable to walk.



**"I'm sorry, I can't be a part of that kind of humor."**

Jolene Baller  
WGRF news director,  
protesting jokes about  
Christopher Reeve

"Someday Joseph will be listening to the radio, and I want him to be proud of his mother," Ms. Baller said.

Norton seemed particularly irked on the air that Ms. Baller would not join in the comedy bit on Reeve. He kept trying to cajole Ms. Baller to the mike to get some laughs, and when she refused to participate, he called her "stone face."

Finally, Norton put her in front of the mike and, on the air, Ms. Baller said she was sorry but could not be a part of such comedy.

The Reeve jokes were the latest of an ongoing bout of tasteless humor and vulgarity that has been a regular part of the Norton/Stout program.

In May, the Federal Communications Commission is

sued a \$4,000 indecency fine to Rich Communications, then owner of WGRF-FM 96.9, for the offensive antics of Norton and Stout. That fine was for a bit about a woman having sex with a plunger.

Norton caused a furor a few years ago when he joked about the death of Eric Clapton's son, who accidentally fell to his death.

"I don't think we should hurt people who are suffering," Ms. Baller said. "It gives me an empty feeling, and it just isn't right."