

# Bill Bonds, former Detroit TV news anchor, dies

By Tim Kiska and Matt Helms, Detroit Free Press 10:16 p.m. EST December 14, 2014



(Photo: John Collier)

Bill Bonds, the legendary Detroit television reporter known for his on-air swagger as much as his colorful behavior on-camera and off, died today, according to WXYZ-TV (Channel 7), the station where he became one of the region's best-known news broadcasters. He was 82.

The station reported that he suffered a heart attack this afternoon. An editor at the station confirmed the report and said a statement would be forthcoming.

For years, Bonds, along with co-anchor Diana Lewis, dominated the Detroit television market. Bonds' private life was often as discussed as his colorful newscasts, as he battled alcoholism, buried a daughter and went through a divorce. In 1989, he challenged then-Mayor Coleman Young on air to a boxing match, after which he made his first public admission of his battle with alcohol.

Channel 7 fired Bonds in 1995, months after a drunken driving arrest. After the arrest, Bonds stayed several months in an Atlanta treatment facility.

As an anchorman at Channel 7 from the mid-1960s until the mid-1990s, Bonds introduced an element of theater into the nightly newscast. Depending on the inflection of his voice or the arch of his eyebrows, he could telegraph any combination of anger, rage or humor to punctuate a story.

"People automatically thought Bonds when they thought news," said Amyre Makupson, the former Channel 50 anchorwoman. "Whether you liked him or not, whether you liked his opinions or not, he made news not boring."

It seemed as if nobody was neutral when it came to opinions of Bonds.

But there was no arguing with his numbers: In February, 1977, for instance, the Arbitron ratings service estimated that 1 of every 5 television households in metro Detroit watched his newscasts. Arbitron further estimated that he drew more than 40% of the television audience watching at that hour.



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Said former Channel 7 general manager Jeanne Findlater: "He could read the telephone book and make you pay attention."

A native of Detroit's west side, Bonds attended Catholic schools, including Visitation. Even then, he was known for arguing with authority figures. "I had a few things to say about the way black kids were treated," Bonds recalled in an interview.

After a tour of duty in the Air Force and a stint as a student at the University of Detroit, where he received a BA in political science, Bonds became a radio newsman in the 1950s.

Starting out at a radio station in Albion at a wage of \$1.50 per hour, he later worked at metro Detroit radio stations WPON-AM, WOMC-FM and WKNR-AM.

His work at WKNR-AM was particularly noteworthy. Although known mostly as a teen rock station, WKNR-AM also had one of the best broadcast news operations in Detroit, with two news broadcasts an hour, 24 hours a day.

He worked a brutal schedule: newscasts every fifteen minutes between 4:45 a.m. and 9 a.m., after which he would pack a tape recorder and spend the rest of the day covering Detroit city government.

The late Free Press publisher Neal Shine once recalled Bonds as hardworking, aggressive and driven. "He ran scared. Terror is a great prod," Shine once said. "Radio was such a lost cause for news, but everybody knew how good he (Bonds) was, and how hard he worked. He never let up."

Bonds was convinced that he could make the leap from radio to the more glamorous new medium of television. He auditioned at Channels 2 and 4, but was rejected. He was also rejected at WJR-AM, the most prestigious news operation in town. "I was told my voice wasn't big league-enough," he remembered..

It was an act of God that finally got Bonds into the television business. A tornado hit Anchor Bay during the spring of 1964, leaving about 600 residents homeless and demolishing more than 50 homes.

Bonds found that he could not send his reports back to the WKNR-AM newsroom via regular telephone lines, which were down. Instead, Bonds climbed to the top of a telephone pole and in search of ways to transmit his stories. The reports were broadcast around the country, and earned a call from then-Channel 7 general manager John Pival, who told Bonds that the Anchor Bay reporting was some of the best he had heard in years and he hired Bonds.

After working as a street reporter, Bonds replaced longtime newsman Leon McNew as the station's lead anchorman.

Bonds earned a nationwide reputation shortly thereafter for his coverage of the 1967 Detroit riot.

Bonds' performance earned him a job at KABC-TV, the ABC-owned television station in Los Angeles, where he enjoyed only modest success.

He returned to Detroit about three years later, and established himself as Detroit's most talked-about newsman—and stayed put, with the exception of a year in 1975-76 at New York's WABC-TV.

Colleagues attribute Bonds' success to his passion. Bonds, they say, was the opposite of the "rip-and-read" newsman. He read voraciously, brooding obsessively about current events. He read at least two newspapers cover-to-cover by 10 a.m., and would watch and dissect the morning news shows.

Dick Kernen, a longtime educator at Specs Howard School of Media Arts, which teaches broadcasting, said Saturday that Bonds' on-air demeanor of the scrapper for the underdog was a rare trait that made him stand out among Detroit's TV news anchors.

People related to him and his troubles.

"We could charge a helluva lot more tuition if we could teach that, but you either have it or you don't," Kernen said. "He had the combination of being very arrogant on the one hand and a very great, funny, down-to-earth guy on the other."

And then, of course, there was the drinking, which fueled his argumentative nature. His first drunken driving arrest occurred after a drunken, roadside fistfight with a teenager after a near-traffic accident.

As the drinking became more obvious, some Detroiters watched his newscast only to judge Bonds' on-air sobriety.

Bonds never reclaimed his popularity after leaving Channel 7. He hosted an 11 p.m. news interview show on Channel 2 (WJBK) in 1995, but the program was canceled within a year because of poor ratings. He later hosted a morning interview show on WXYT-AM, but that, too, did not last long. His drinking again became a problem. After a series of no-shows, Bonds and the station parted ways.

He did have one more shot on the air: Channel 7 asked Bonds to narrate a program celebrating the station's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1998. Bonds was hired after Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer asked Channel 7 general manager Grace Gilchrist at the station's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary party to give Bonds another shot.

He was, indeed, hired shortly thereafter to comment on the day's news. He left within a year to work as a spokesman for the Gardner-White furniture company.

Those who knew Bonds say he was capable of incredible kindness and breathtaking boorishness. For instance, he once buttonholed then Detroit Mayor Jerome P. Cavanagh at a party that "I could beat your --ss if I ran." (Cavanagh replied: "There's nothing stopping you.")

Bonds last appeared publicly at the local Detroit Emmy awards in June. Though he appeared thin and haggard, he had spent at least the past 10 years sober, according to friends.

But still, to the very end -- even when he had difficulty getting around -- he wanted back in the business.

"God, I miss it," he said, in an interview for a Detroit Public Television documentary about local television.

Former Channel 7 general manager Jeanne Findlater said managing Bonds was a "nonstop job...It was as frustrating an experience as I ever had. It was, in equal measure, a rewarding experience."

In the end, all of the factors -- the dramatic flair, the passion, the unpredictability -- drew an audience.

"You have to give people a reason to watch, and he did that," said Makupson. "He made news exciting."

Bonds is survived by his wife, Karen; a son, John; and two daughters Kristine and Mary. Services are pending.

His family issued this statement Saturday night: "For us Bill was so much more than the face on TV, the talented anchorman. He was a wonderful husband and father who cared deeply about his children and his family. We will miss him greatly."

Bill had a great passion for the news business. More than anything, he loved bringing the news to the people of Detroit. Bill believed we were a better community, if we were a well-informed community.

We thank everyone for their thoughts and prayers during this difficult time."

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