

By VANESSA SALVIA
BOOMER & SENIOR NEWS

When 73-year-old Fred Crafts retired in 2004, he didn't have a plan. He knew it was time to begin unplugging himself from his lengthy career as a journalist and arts critic, but beyond that, he wasn't sure what was going to occupy his time. Crafts is not the idle type, but despite that, he had no inkling that he soon would be leading a repertory theatre company. That all came later, though, after he experienced an unexpected setback.

"I didn't really have a plan for my retirement, but Mother Nature seemed to have a plan for me because I came down with cancer soon after," he recalls. Crafts retired in June, was diagnosed with cancer by November, and "2005 became the 'Cancer Year' of treatment and recovery."

Despite the health scare, Crafts knew he was not the type to sit around doing nothing.

"I'd been busy doing multiple things all of my life and I knew I wasn't going to last very long, but what to



Photo by Vanessa Salvia

A man with a plan

Arts critic Fred Crafts resurrects old-time radio

do?" he says.

In 2004, Crafts was president of the Eugene Rotary

Club and casted Rotarians for a performance of "A Christmas Carol." He knew the

members would be unlikely to have time for rehearsals and memorizations, so he gave them scripts for a 30-minute production to read aloud as a live, staged radio program.

That planted the seed for Radio Redux, a theatre troupe that stages retellings of programs from the "golden age" of radio, 1935 to 1960. For Crafts, having a project to dedicate time for was "a lifesaver." And, he says, it fills a niche for seniors who remember this type of entertainment from their youth.

"It's a trip down memory lane for them, and for other people it's a new experience," Crafts says. "It's fun to introduce people to that and preserve what I think is a wonderful way of telling stories."

A real storyteller

Telling stories is what Crafts calls "the thread of his life." He fondly recalls time spent as a child growing up in Eugene, listening to radio

programs, and he wanted to be on the radio. But by the time he was old enough to be on the radio, the shows were off the air. He wasn't particularly interested in performing, though he did enjoy playing bass for a jazz combo. Then the new rock and roll he was hearing on the radio piqued his interest.

At 16, he took a part-time weekend job as a DJ playing rock and roll records ("Earth Angel" by The Penguins, a 1953 hit, was an early favorite).

That early training in broadcasting helped polish his already deep and robust speaking voice. He moved from the independent radio station to Eugene's CBS station, where he was asked to contribute a news story.

"The first story I was to cover was the Miss Eugene contest," he recalls. "I didn't know how to do it so I took my mother with me! It was a

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CRAFTS

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big success so I became the radio news director while I was going to college.”

After graduating with a journalism degree, Crafts went on to work in a variety of radio stations in town, spending decades at the Register-Guard, at CBS in Los Angeles and later, as the fine arts editor for “The Los Angeles Times” and as an adjunct journalism professor at the University of Oregon. Crafts founded the First Friday Art Walk and was named Eugene’s Ambassador for the Arts in 2008. In 2013, he was honored with the Age Knows No Limits award, a project that celebrates older citizens and the many ways they contribute and remain active and healthy.

“It’s a great time of life,” he says. “You’ve done a lot of things, you have a lot of experiences, you’ve got a lot of energy, and it’s great to find an outlet for that.”

Crafts is active in his church and acts as judge for art competitions as well as a master of ceremonies for community service and arts events.

“I don’t come from a business background, I come from an arts background,” he says, “so my natural focus is on the artistic side, but because of Radio Redux, I’ve had to learn the business side, and doing all of that is quite fun.”

His wife, Marti Gerdes, also a journalist, is “the sounding board and the support system” for Radio Redux.

Radio Redux

Word of Crafts’ successful Rotarian production of “A Christmas Carol” spread, and Pleasant Hill Theatre wanted to get involved. The show was expanded to an hour and produced as a benefit for their youth program, using the theatre’s own actors, for several years. Eventually, Willamalane Parks and Recreation sponsored his troupe and they moved to the Wildish Theatre in Springfield.

Once again, Crafts says he didn’t have a plan. “I just did it because it seemed like a fun thing to do,” he says. “We put it together and threw it out to the public, and on Wednesday before the show we had sold two tickets and by Friday the Wildish Theatre was sold out. That’s 280 seats! I was aston-



Photo by Vanessa Salvia

Fred Crafts (far left) poses with the cast of his latest Radio Redux production, “Sam Spade and the Buddha’s Tooth Caper.”

ished. The actors kept coming back saying, ‘Fred, there’s a lot of people out there,’ and I would say, ‘Oh yeah, right.’ Then, ‘Fred, it looks like it’s filling up,’ and that was the beginning of all this.”

The first season of Radio Redux, in 2009-10, opened with “The War of the Worlds,” “The Maltese Falcon,” “The Hitchiker,” “Walter Mitty,” and “Stagecoach.”

Now entering its fifth year, Crafts says the success snuck up on him. “You know the saying ‘putting one foot in front of the other?’ It was like putting one show in front of the other. When I did the first one I didn’t have the second one in mind because I didn’t know the first would be a success. Eventually, I realized, we’re doing seasons.”

In October, Radio Redux presented “Sam Spade and the Buddha’s Tooth Caper,” a thrilling gum-shoe detective story. In early December they produced “It’s a Wonderful Life,” followed by two more shows in February and April.

“I see how we’ve struck a nerve,” he notes. “After every show people come up to me and say, ‘That was the best show ever, you just keep getting better and better,’ which is very satisfying to me because it means we’re improving.”

Now, seven years into the project, Craft is starting to make plans. He’s focusing on the sustainability of Radio Redux, so that it can continue when he can no longer manage it, by turning it into a non-profit.

Of note

Radio Redux presents “It’s a Wonderful Life,” at 7:30 p.m. Dec. 6 and 7, and 2 p.m. Dec. 8 at Wildish Theater, 630 Main St., Springfield. Cost: \$11-\$18. Details: 541-206-3282 or radioreduxusa.com.

In addition, film-radio historian Patrick Lucanio talks about how radio shaped the holidays, in “Christmas in Radioland,” at 6:45 p.m, Springfield Public Library, 225 W. 5th St., and 6:45 p.m Dec. 7, Springfield Museum, 590 Main St.

“I don’t do it for money but it has to have some money because we have to pay rent and insurance and I pay the actors a little bit,” he says.

He keeps the cost down by not paying himself. His office is at home, and he stores all the

props in his garage.

“I realized last year that this is actually real,” he says. “It’s been one of the big surprises and big joys of my life. It’s just a real blessing to have all these new people in my life.” ■

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