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Early bird juggles jobs

KCHO morning DJ handles many tasks as he brings national, local news to Chico

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The Chico State University campus is nearly silent at 6:30 a.m. on a Tuesday. Deep in the basement of Meriam Library, things are the same, until Todd Thornton shoots out of a small room like a Kentucky thoroughbred. He's been here since 5 a.m. "In about 30 seconds I am going to run in and do a break," he said.

Exactly 30 seconds later, he is sitting in the DJ booth at KCHO 91.7 FM, Chico State's public radio station. Thornton is ready to give his listeners news updates on Trinity Hospital and Proposition 36.

But Thornton is much more than the morning voice. In between his segments, he sends a story to The Associated Press, checks the national show on the satellite and then gathers news for his broadcasts.

He edits his news stories, searches for news and keeps track of what is on the air.

And he does it all by himself. Thornton has been in radio and television broadcasting for 12 years, and said he doesn't even need an alarm clock to wake him at 4 a.m. five days a week.

He said he makes at least a dozen mistakes in his newscasts each morning, but knows enough tricks so his listeners can't tell.

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What do you think of Sigma Kappa being suspended?

They should be suspended because they should have kept an eye on that girl

They should be reprimanded, but not this harshly

It's not Sigma Kappas fault

The media is taking this too far

Don't know/don't care

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About 10 seconds after finishing his newscast, Thornton is sitting in his office under a journalism degree from Cal State Northridge. He clicks through the Internet for news updates from Sacramento to the Oregon border. He mumbles when he finds a change in the Weaverville temperature, and then he's up and off again down the hallway.

He checks the fax machine for triple-fatal car wrecks and the AP wire to make sure the "pope's not dead."

These are valuable resources for Thornton. Without any kind of staff, he relies especially on the AP to bring him local news.

"I have to do 100 percent of everything at this station," he said. "There's not another soul here in the morning."

He checks the weather once more before heading back to the booth.

"Well shuck my corn, it is raining in Redding," he said in a Southern drawl.

There is no clock in sight, yet Thornton knows he has one minute before going back on the air.

"You just kind of develop a sixth sense about timing, like, 'Oh my God, I should be on right now,'" he said.

He sits down and puts on his headphones. He fiddles with the controls, turns the speakers off and clears his throat. "Stand by," he says.

He begins calmly and smoothly, as if he had been sitting still the entire time. While he speaks into the microphone, he slips in a sound-bite card to be played, continues to play with the controls and flips through his stack of papers. For the weather, he ad-libs from a page of his own chicken scratch.

Thornton said his weather reports allow him to slow down and lighten up. His usual humor isn't expressed in his newscasts because it isn't what public radio listeners tune in for.

Thornton knows he provides a quality broadcast for the station, but he said it's unusual for it to be first pick for thousands of listeners.

"Most people don't know that public radio exists," he said.

Thornton said he feels like he is the glue holding everything together in a small market where talent and experience are hard to find. Then he contradicts himself, laughing, and says he probably doesn't deserve much of the credit for the station's success.

He said all broadcasting personalities are horribly insecure.

"It's easy to get down in this business," he said. "You have to learn how to develop a thick skin."

However, Thornton says he thrives on positive feedback and learns to let the rest roll off

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his back. His passion for news broadcasting will likely keep him working hard each morning.

"I'm not qualified to do anything else in life," he said. "I don't see myself going anywhere for a while."

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