In the early 1960s Father Colman Barry, then a history professor, was intrigued by the college’s student radio station, of which I was the manager. When I was about to graduate in 1964 and Colman was about to be appointed president, he asked me what I was planning to do. I told him I’d like to attend graduate school in either business or communications. With the support of Dr. Waldemar Wenner, Colman said, “Choose communications and we’ll send you to graduate school if you’ll agree to come back and begin a radio station for Saint John’s.”

I went off to Boston University and Stanford to study communications theory and law and hang out at WGBH in Boston and KQED in San Francisco, where some of the most advanced thinking in public broadcasting was occurring. Colman and I carried on an active correspondence about how to proceed. I wanted to broadcast on the FM band, but at the time AM had most of the audience. Colman’s advisors, including Larry Haeg Sr., general manager of WCCO, and Father Vincent Yzermans, head of the
National Association of Religious Broadcasters, urged him to apply for a small AM station to serve Saint Cloud. Colman went with his intuition and approved the plan for an FM station.

Two key players in MPR's success: William King & Garrison Keeler
Colman had to persuade the monastic community to fund the project. When I returned to Saint John’s in January 1966, he arranged with Abbot Baldwin Dworschak to have me address the chapter and answer questions in the abbey chapter house. I was then twenty-four years old. In the end the chapter approved funding for the station.

From that point on, my job was to get a station on the air. I read books on acoustics and designed a studio complex on the top floor of Wimmer Hall, where the museum, with its stuffed buffalo and other exhibits, had been located. Physics professor Father Casper Keogh provided an altimeter to enable me to search the campus for the highest land for the transmitter. The campus workmen, with considerable skepticism, built the studio concept as designed, including double masonry walls, isolated electrical and ventilation systems, and an oversized office for me, my reaction to spending a year in a room the size of a closet over the steaming campus kitchen.

KSJR signed on on January 22, 1967, while Colman dined at the Germain Hotel in Saint Cloud with supporters and a portable radio. Unfortunately, the station didn’t manage to get on the air until about five hours after the publicized time, and then perhaps only because of the prayers of Father Fintan Bromenshenkel, head of computer science, who paced the hall waiting and wishing he could offer assistance. It brought the surrounding community a menu of classical music, lectures, jazz, poetry, and even live stereo broadcasts of Saint John’s football. In many ways, lacking an NPR network of any type, these were stimulating days. The programmers had to work so hard to find quality programs that they scoured the country looking for the best and often struck gold. Sources like Ford Hall Forum in Boston and the Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco, the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara, and other sources that reflected my graduate school geography provided a stimulating flow of programming.

The station was a programmatic success and a gem despite intermittent on-air time because of static electricity in the studio carpet and gophers gnawing through the power line to the distant transmitter, but there was little audience and little financial support. Memberships were $12 a year, and by 1970 only two thousand had been enrolled. Program underwriting was almost unheard of. Then Sarah-Maud W. (for Weyerhaeuser) Sivertsen sent a check for $5,000 to indicate her pleasure at being able to hear the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts from her lake home in rural Scandia Valley. It was a great boost for both Colman and me because it indicated what the potential might be. But she and Bob Sivertsen were rare fans.

KSJR was built as a 40,000-watt station to serve Stearns County. Soon it became clear that serving Stearns County wasn’t a financially viable concept. With a gift from Dr. Wenner, the station expanded
to 150,000 watts, the largest FM station in the Midwest. It still missed the key audience of the Twin Cities. Despite having a staff of fewer than seven people (including a morning classical music announcer by the name of Garrison Keillor), the station ran deeply into debt.

I suggested expanding to where the audience was—the Twin Cities. With little discretionary money left in 1968, Saint John’s applied for KSJN, a 3,400-watt station in the New Brighton suburb of the Twin Cities, to expand the audience. But that station struggled with static interference whenever the wind blew, and the financial problem grew. We took advantage of FM’s SCA “second channel” to add a broadcast service for the blind and gained some assistance with operating costs from the Hamm Foundation and a state agency for the visually handicapped.

While innovations like that helped, they didn’t resolve the financial problem. In 1969 Father Colman, Father Gordon Tavis, Abbot Baldwin, and I decided to preserve the concept by giving the assets to a broader-based community corporation, first named Saint John’s University Broadcasting, Inc., then Minnesota Educational Radio, and finally Minnesota Public Radio. Colman urged the private college presidents to join him in making MPR a private college initiative to serve all of Minnesota. We gradually transferred our principal offices and studios to Saint Paul.

KSJR shouldn’t have succeeded, but it did because neither Colman nor I understood that it shouldn’t have. Normal thinking would not have trusted the instincts of a twenty-four-year-old over wiser, more successful practitioners. Few would have protected the funding and the manager as Colman did. Even fewer institutions would have given up their broadcast licenses and assets in order to help save the “mission,” as Saint John’s did. Those selfless acts—looking at the long-range community good, taking chances on people that may not have been defended in any rational manner, and believing it could be done—may be one of Saint John’s proudest moments.

William Kling ’64

Note: the above excerpt was taken from the book *Saint John’s at 150*, which is available at the SJU campus book store.