

# The Paley Media Center: A TV Professional is in Charge

By Fritz Jacobi

Last June the Museum of Television and Radio—established by CBS Chairman William S. Paley in 1975 as the Museum of Broadcasting—changed its name once again: to the Paley Center for Media. The reason, according to an official announcement:

“To better reflect its evolution to a center that convenes media leaders and enthusiasts for programs that explore and illuminate the immense and growing impact of all media on our lives, culture and society.”

In an exclusive interview with *Television Quarterly*, Paley Center



*Paley Media Center CEO Pat Mitchell*

Kevin Parry / The Paley Center for Media

president Pat Mitchell, who had served as PBS president for six years before joining the MTR as chief executive in 2006, explained that MTR Chairman Frank A. Bennack, Jr., the former head of the Hearst Corporation, had discussed with her the need for a name change.

“Frank noted that our board reflected a much broader spectrum of media than just radio and television,” she said. “Now cable and the Internet are involved. Ed Ney, a distinguished advertising man, brought in a world-class naming organization, Landor, who donated their services. The change took six months. They landed on ‘Center’ because this is not an actual museum. Some visitors had actually asked for their money back when they discovered that we didn’t display such artifacts as old television and radio sets or Archie Bunker’s chair. Even though many young people never heard of Bill Paley, when they learned that he was a great innovator the response to the proposed new name was very positive.”

**M**s. Mitchell said that while both the Manhattan facility, on West 52nd Street, and the Beverly Hills branch in California—established in 1996—will continue to make their identical collections of radio and television programs available to the general public, the West Coast Center will reflect the area’s greater interest in entertainment while the New York Center often spotlights public affairs. For example, the Los Angeles Center features the Paley Festival of ten days of current and classic television, with participation by casts and directors, while in New York “we use the collection to show how a program may have had a role in influencing foreign policy,”

Ms. Mitchell noted, citing appearances by such figures as Madeleine Albright and Henry Kissinger in public forums at the Center.

“We have a dual mission,” she added, “media-industry people and public programs.” She conducts many of the interviews herself. Having worked as a reporter for all three broadcasting networks from 1972 to 1992, she brings to the job an invaluable diversity of experience.

**A** recent example of a well-attended public program spotlighted Ms. Mitchell’s interview of Queen Noor of Jordan, the daughter of a distinguished Arab-American family who in 1978 married King Hussein, the father of Jordan’s present king. Taking place the very day the Museum changed its name to the Paley Center, the conversation covered Queen Noor’s devotion to such causes as women and children’s welfare, conservation and human rights, and also featured television clips focusing on these aspects of her life.

Ms. Mitchell attributes her facility as an interviewer not only to her extensive television-news experience but also to her previous work as a teacher. “Teaching prepared me best for my entire career in television,” she said. “Because in teaching, whether you were teaching sixth graders of college sophomores”—and she has done both—“you had to impart information in away that was engaging enough to be remembered and impactful.”

A major Paley Center project very close to Ms. Mitchell’s heart is “She Made It: Women Creating Television and Radio,” a tribute to the visionary women pioneers and contemporary innovators who have had a major impact on the artistic growth and financial success of radio and television. For



Pat Mitchell (left) with Jordan's American-born Queen Noor

Jimi Celeste/The Paley Center for Media

each of the past two years the Center has saluted 50 women—from Gertrude Berg and Pauline Frederick to Rosanne Barr and Judy Woodruff—who have been responsible for the development of the industry.

“These contributions have been largely ignored in standard textbooks,” Ron Simon, the Center’s television curator, wrote last winter in *Television Quarterly*. He added that “She Made It” spotlights the accomplishments of “exemplary women in four distinct realms: entertainment, news, sports and the executive suite. The project focuses on women’s contributions as producers, writers and directors as well as heads of networks.” Simon noted that the Center, in consultation with an advisory committee of women in the industry, is currently compiling a third list of distinguished women as 2007 honorees. Ms. Mitchell was so honored when she headed PBS.

In 2001, shortly after assuming the residency of PBS, Pat Mitchell was interviewed in these pages by the late Arthur Unger, former television critic

of *The Christian Science Monitor*. Unger asked her how, with so many competing cable channels, like the History Channel, A&E and Discovery, she thought PBS could survive.

“By being different,” she replied. “They’ve stolen our genres but not our thunder...They don’t do what we do. The History Channel is not doing history the way *The American Experience* does. We have the purpose of education in mind as well. So we don’t just put a program on television for entertainment. We make sure it has educational components that are translated immediately into classroom curriculum materials.”

**T**oday she adds that PBS is drawing two and a half times the audience for A&E, the History Channel, CNN and Fox. “There is still a substantial audience for PBS based on its reputation,” she says. As to the increasing commercialization of PBS programs, she notes that “the underwriters demand it and PBS has no choice because it’s so underfunded.”

She added, however, that corporate underwriting messages do not interrupt PBS programs as they do on commercial television and that when Exxon/Mobil asked to place real commercials in the narrative flow of *Masterpiece Theater* she turned them down.

During her tenure at PBS she found government pressure “very tough and distracting,” as exemplified by former CPB Chairman Kenneth Y. Tomlinson’s hounding of Bill Moyers. “Tomlinson was soundly defeated,” she notes with satisfaction. “Moyers is my hero!”

Before joining PBS as President and CEO—the first woman and first producer and journalist to hold that position—Ms. Mitchell had served for eight years as an executive in charge of original productions for Ted Turner’s cable networks. Her documentaries and specials received 37 Emmy Awards, five Peabody Awards and two Academy Award nominations.

Pat Mitchell serves on more than a half-dozen prestigious corporate boards, ranging from Sun Microsystems to the Bank of America. She derives her greatest satisfaction, however, from her work for such eleemosynary outfits as the Mayo Clinic. “It sets very high standards for health care,” she notes, “increasingly taking a leadership role in health-care reform.” Other organizations she supports fight violence against women and empower women by giving them their own voice and their own independence. She is also vice-chair of the Sundance Institute, which trains independent film and theater artists. “This,” she says, “is great fun!”

Pat Mitchell is a busy woman. She and her husband, Scott Seydel—a chemical engineer and

environmentalist working, among other projects, on a massive waste-management project for New York City—have six children, ranging in age from 21 to 42. They include a lawyer, two MBA’s, two real-estate executives and a filmmaker. And there are 10 grandchildren, ranging in age from six months—a pair of twins, whose photo she proudly displays—to 16.

In the introduction to his 2001 *Television Quarterly* interview of Pat Mitchell as the new chief executive of PBS Arthur Unger wrote that “the reception area of the Public Broadcasting Service’s new headquarters in Alexandria, Virginia, seemed boringly, almost monochromatically, gray-green. But when I walked into her office, the excitement was palpable. My eyes were almost blinded by a flash of white walls, a colorful rug and exciting paintings hung all around. And by a radiant Pat Mitchell—blonde, trim, in a beige pantsuit—bubbling over with ideas, enthusiasm and determination to return PBS to the full glory of its initial concept. Ms. Mitchell is handsome—pretty, bordering on beautiful—but her real beauty stems from her intelligence and intensity.”

Six years later, it still does.

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*The editor of Television Quarterly, Fritz Jacobi has been working in and around television—both commercial and public—since the time of Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca, Howdy Doody, Victory at Sea and The Great American Dream Machine.*