



Who's not being heard from in the stories of the day? That's a key question for former *Nightline* colleagues Nelson (foreground) and Martin as they plan NPR's new daily show, *Tell Me More*. (Photo: Stephen Voss, © 2007 NPR.)

Voices of *Tell Me More*: those you haven't heard

By Karen Everhart

Fourteen days after the national debut of NPR's *Tell Me More*, a morning news program hosted by former ABC News correspondent Michel Martin, the staff was celebrating a breakthrough interview on May 17.

After pursuing Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf for more than a year, Martin and Senior Supervising Producer Maria Nelson had persuaded her to grant them an interview during a recent U.S. trip.

Martin and Nelson, who left ABC's *Nightline* to create an NPR newsmagazine that would go after issues of diversity and culture in new ways, began trying to book Sirleaf in January 2006, when she was inaugurated as president and they started work at NPR.

They had reason enough to put Sirleaf at the top of their booking list: She's the first woman elected president of an African nation. But they also sought her out because a conversation with her fit a key objective they set for *Tell Me More*—to consistently examine the difference it makes when

women and people of color are in positions of leadership.

"You very often hear these people spoken of as objects, but not as leaders," Martin said. She wants them on her program, "not to grind some axe, but because that's a logical way to add new voices."

Bringing new voices to public radio is a hallmark of the month-old *Tell Me More*, the first NPR show to be piloted online through the Rough Cuts process—the Bryant Park Project for young adults is in process now.

And *Tell Me More* is the third effort to design an NPR program that's relevant to more minority listeners—following public radio's original *Tavis Smiley Show* and its successor, *News & Notes*.

Though *Tell Me More* was conceived originally as an afternoon call-in show designed, like *News & Notes*, especially for African-Americans, it took a different approach after piloting, widening its editorial lens to reflect the perspectives of additional minority groups.

"We realized that on some stations [*Tell Me More*] would be a complement to *News & Notes*," said Jay Kernis, NPR senior pro-

gramming v.p. But other stations expressed interest in Martin hosting a show with a distinct perspective but a broader audience.

"One of the things that is exciting about this show is, they don't have to cover everything—we have other shows that do that," Kernis said, referring to *Tell Me More*. "This show can really ask the questions, 'Who's not being heard, who else should be at the table to be part of this discussion?' Sometimes it's African-Americans, Asians or Latinos, and sometimes it's people who just don't get a chance to be heard from."

The emphasis on unheard voices drives story choices such as Martin's field-produced interview with three homeless women who described why they dreaded Mother's Day. The same approach shaped the Mocha Moms segment, a recurring Tuesday chat among stay-at-home mothers who are primarily African-American. Race, culture and motherhood are recurring topics, but the guests often range into paler skin tones. For the Mocha Moms installment on May 15, Martin interviewed white women who are raising black sons.

"You do not hear people talk about that," said Bobby Walker Trussell, p.d. of WJSU in Jackson, Miss. There's plenty of hard-news coverage on other programs, including *News & Notes*, she said. *Tell Me More* takes a softer approach but covers stories she wouldn't have heard about otherwise. "Basically it's a good program, and to me it's a needed program."

Tell Me More dedicates more time to specific news stories, "and they don't give you the story you're going to hear in the mainstream media" said Edith Thorpe, g.m. and p.d. of WNCU in Raleigh-Durham, N.C. "They give you the side you are not going to hear."

Both WNCU and WJSU are members of the African American Public Radio Consortium, which collaborated with NPR on development of Smiley's show, *News & Notes* and *Tell Me More*. They began airing *Tell Me More* at launch and are among 20 stations now putting it on their primary broadcast service. NPR anticipates additional pickups this summer. New York's WNYC is considering it for debut later this year, according to a spokeswoman for the station.

As with any public radio program, carriage by major-market stations will be a key indicator of *Tell Me More*'s viability. "Any show that's become a successful show in public radio has taken years to develop," said NPR's Kernis. "At the same time, there are benchmarks." Carriage in the top 25 markets would make *Tell Me More* available to 40 percent of NPR listeners, he said. Online lis-

tening will be another measure of the show's success, even though industry benchmarks for web usage have yet to be firmly established, he said.

The launch of *Tell Me More* also brought changes to *News & Notes*, hosted by Farai Chideya. The show still focuses on African-American perspectives on the news, but the L.A.-based program shifted from morning to afternoon origination. Producing a morning program from the West Coast was exhausting for the *News & Notes* staff, Kernis said, and created a dynamic of "diminishing returns." The time change, which pushed its live feed time from 6 to 10 a.m. Pacific, is intended to help strengthen the show.

A great thing about morning shows

Tell Me More, meanwhile, shifted from an afternoon call-in to morning magazine. Martin said this created a "a weird confluence of circumstances and dreams" for her. She had always wanted to do a morning show.

The combination of news and lifestyle reporting on morning news programs—or as she described it, "something for your head, something for your heart"—appealed to her. Morning shows that work, she said, give their audiences information that meets their intellectual and civic needs "but also offer things that you need as a human being just to live."

Martin's experience hosting PBS's *Life 360*, a short-lived Friday night newsmagazine, opened her up to reporting "that is also about your life," she said. The series, which debuted in September 2001 when the nation was consumed with grief and anxiety over the 9/11 terrorist attacks, was based on a sound concept, even though the production circumstances were difficult, Martin said "I thought it would be great to do a show that was really all about the way most of us really are—that would think some, feel some, enjoy some. That's what we're trying to do," Martin said.

Piloting *Tell Me More* on NPR.org played an important role in the decision to broaden

the show's target audience while still covering themes that interested her—new voices, multiculturalism in leadership and audience interaction. "It kind of stiffened my backbone because it gave me more confidence that my vision would be accepted and appreciated by the audience because of the feedback that we got," Martin said.

In the four months of piloting, while *Tell Me More* was a Rough Cut work-in-progress on the website, downloads of its podcast totaled 242,000, according to NPR.

Online piloting "allowed us to have a direct relationship with the audience and the fact is that it helped us build the show," Kernis said. Listeners responded with enthusiasm to hearing different perspectives on the news.

"The audience that wrote in during the pilot made it clear that that was very exciting to them—that there wasn't just one take on the news," Kernis said. "They were very much appreciating the different takes that Michel and her staff were presenting." ■