

In Memoriam: Merri Dee, Chicago Broadcasting Legend, Dies at 85

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CHICAGO – She was a pioneer in a broadcasting business at a time when it was mostly white and male. The incomparable Merri Dee was a fixture in Chicago media beginning in the 1960s, breaking barriers as a black woman TV personality and newscaster. She passed away in Chicago on March 16th, 2022, at age 85.

She was born Mary Francine Dorham in Chicago, and grew up in New Orleans. She returned to Chicago as a teenager, and attended Englewood Technical Prep Academy before going on to Xavier University of Louisiana. Her first on-air host job was on radio in 1966, WBEE-AM in Harvey, Illinois.



Merri Dee on the Red Carpet in 2010, Chicago

Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Photo for HollywoodChicago.com

She made her mark in television on UHF, the new signal spectrum in the 1960s, first on an entertainment show on WCIU Channel 26 in 1968, and then on her own “Merri Dee Show” on WSNS Channel 44 in 1971. In a bizarre incident after doing a show, Dee was kidnapped at gunpoint and shot (Alan Sandler, a guest on the show who was also abducted, was killed). After a year of recovery, she was hired by WGN-TV to anchor the 10pm newscast. She split her duties between on air and behind the scenes with the station, becoming a community development director and charity representative position beginning in 1984, and remained at the station until her retirement in 2008.

Her charity work was legion, as she did work or represented the United Negro College Fund, Easter Seals, the Ronald McDonald House and in accordance with her abduction, she helped draft the State of Illinois Victims Bill of Rights, a model for other states. Among her honors were the Silver Circle Award of the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, in addition to the National Association of Black Journalists Hall of Fame.

In 2010, Patrick McDonald interviewed Merri Dee at a Red Carpet event, with an Exclusive Portrait by Photographer Joe Arce.

HollywoodChicago.com: You are a pioneer not just because of how you broke into broadcasting, but also how news reporting changed into a more personality-based show in the late 1960s and early ‘70s. What was most intimidating about your early years in the business, even as you were breaking in?

Merri Dee: I wasn’t intimidated. The challenge was in the fact that there were no other African-American women at my level. I came in at a level and didn’t even know it. I was just the girl from the neighborhood still thinking I was just breaking in ... and there I was, someone else at a different level. That was the challenge.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was the most unforgettable event that you covered in your long career?

Dee: I think it was Martin Luther King. I was awed and honored to meet him, even though I wasn't necessarily that involved, but just the fact that I knew the people around him and had access. It was quite the honor.

HollywoodChicago.com: Was Dr. King's trip to Chicago to protest substandard housing in 1966 a success in your estimation? Because the power in the city at the time tried to squelch him, was this particular event more or less successful than other parts of the entire movement?

Dee: It should have been more successful. He should have been more accepted. He should have been listened to a little bit more. But then Chicago is a very powerful city, and it has always had powerful politics. And when you start to look at that, you're just one person walking in, and you don't change the world.

HollywoodChicago.com: It is amazing to have met the man and then see what has developed in his legacy. Do you feel his humanity is still present in our community, in our culture and substance?

Dee: Yes, I think it is still present. As long as people like myself are still out here, it will be present. Where it has less presence is with the younger people, because we have not developed books and education sufficiently for school children, to be able to see, understand and learn. And then to process it as to where they are and what they want to be in their own lives. Not to copy who Dr. King was, but to become who they are with his message.

Source for this article from Wikipedia.com. Merri Dee, 1936-2022.



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