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This local radio station is about more than music

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DENNIS MCCOY | SACRAMENTO BUSINESS JOURNAL

KDEE station manager Marvell Reed, left, with deejay Jay King.

In its iconic 1972 song, “I’ll Take You There,” family gospel group The Staples Singers sang of a virtual Shangri-La punctuated by a thumping bassline and horn blasts — a place where spirits are lifted, love reigns supreme and worldly worries are relieved.

In Sacramento, there aren’t many radio stations on the dial where that song and others like it can be heard. At KDEE-FM 97.5, however, The Staples Singers live in audio immortality, along with Bobby Womack, The Stylistics, Fatback, Roy Ayers and countless other throwback funk, rhythm and blues and soul artists.

“That’s where I feel our programming is superior to others. Giving people what they can’t get anywhere else,” said Marvell Reed, KDEE’s station manager. “And doing it in a way that nobody else does it.”

But as Reed explains, it isn't just the music that makes KDEE (whose call letters stand for "Dedicated to Economic Empowerment") different from other stations.

Owned and operated by the nonprofit California Black Chamber of Commerce Foundation, KDEE is one of only two black-owned commercial radio stations in the state (the other, Los Angeles' KJLH, is owned by music legend Stevie Wonder).

Founded in 2004, KDEE also offers a talk format geared toward uplifting Sacramento's black community, ranging from programs on financial empowerment and the stock market, to real estate, health and current events.

Nicknamed Sacramento's "Grown Folks' Station," KDEE is the brainchild of [Aubry Stone](#), CEO of the California Black Chamber and director of its foundation. Stone began the station in 2004 to create a platform to preach economic empowerment to Sacramento's black community, while also serving as conduit to share valuable information and ideas.

"The music is to draw you to the station," Stone said. "The content is what the station is about. Family matters. Finance and health. Home equity. Those are the issues that are relevant to our community, that we've got to find out some answers to, collectively."

There's a financial awareness program, "Money Talks" with real estate expert Thaxter Arterberry, which airs 7:45 p.m. every Monday. Arterberry advises listeners on the stock market, real estate and other financial information.

There's also the Family Matters Forum, hosted by Mark Harris, which covers a variety of issues relevant to the community, like politics, pop culture and faith.

Last year, after several incidents nationwide in which unarmed black men were shot by police, the Family Matters Forum's crew took to the airwaves for 41 consecutive hours to take calls from the community, allowing people to speak of their frustrations and fears, and discuss strategies to organize.

Stone says such an "unfiltered medium without the spin" is needed to not only inform the black community during critical times but also act as a tool to plan and strategize. "We are the heartbeat of the community, in real time," Stone said. "If something happens right now, we can have 500 people at City Hall by 5 p.m. That's real time. That's powerful."

Not being beholden to corporate "powers that be" gives the station's deejays free rein to explore important topics to the black community that would make others uncomfortable, said [Jay King](#), an on-air personality who hosts "The Traffic Jam" radio show.

King is well known in Sacramento's music scene as the Grammy-winning songwriter and producer behind Club Nouveau and Timex Social Club, both of whom scored hit songs during the 1980s.

An example of that talk related to local social issues happened after Arden Fair mall was accused by some of racial profiling against teenage black males late last year, after the mall initiated a ban against teens unaccompanied by adults. King took to the airwaves and encouraged black families not to shop at the mall.

The mall's management and owner denied to local media that there was any racial profiling.

"I was able to get on the radio in real time and say, 'If they don't want us in the mall, then we shouldn't go,'" King told the Business Journal. "We were able to say it from this platform, and the people responded. The community responded."

KDEE's first antennae was in Orangevale, and its first headquarters was in Rancho Cordova.

In more recent years, the station has moved closer to the community it serves, covering the metro Sacramento area and surrounding region. KDEE now broadcasts from an antennae in the Arden area, with its studio nearby. The station also has a mobile app and is accessible through its website and the TuneIn radio app.

Reed estimates that the station costs \$150,000 to \$200,000 a year to run. Much of its support comes from black-owned businesses and others that support the chamber's foundation, plus sponsors and small businesses that underwrite air time.

Initially, Stone said he'd envisioned opening two or three radio stations. Now, though, he said it's doubtful the chamber foundation will open another radio station in his lifetime, but he hopes others will carry the baton in the future.

"It's still a struggle," Stone said. "All the maintenance, switching out boxes with one blow-up and burnout, a thousand (dollars) here and a thousand there."

Then there's the challenge of competing with corporate-owned radio stations with large budgets, internet radio stations and online platforms like YouTube, Pandora, Amazon Prime and Spotify.

Stone says that if the station remains true to its core mission and the needs of its audience, it will have no problem holding onto fans.

"We've carved out a lane, and we're going to stay in our lane. We don't try to be everything to everybody," he said.

Stone said his dream is to one day get the station to a level of self-sufficiency where it can be a mechanism to fund endeavors like scholarships and leadership workshops for black students.

“I am very optimistic that it will get there,” he said. “But for the purpose it serves — it’s priceless.”



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