

New KSMQ president, CEO jumps to business side of TV

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The new president and CEO of KSMQ-TV is a first-timer when it comes to being in a television station leadership role. But he's not a newbie when it comes to the television industry.

With more than 20 years of experience, Eric Olson has settled into to his new job with Austin's public television station, KSMQ. He spent 12 years as a reporter and anchor for KARE-11 TV in Minneapolis before moving to Duluth 14 years ago. He's also worked in corporate communications management and served as executive producer for Pioneer Public Television in western Minnesota, where he "first got the PBS bug," he said.

So far, so good after two months at his new job.

"I've never been given an opportunity to manage an operation before," Olson said. "I was thrilled to be approached for this position.

"The weeks just are flying by. I love getting up to go to work in the morning. And that sounds so trite, but that has not always been the case for me. I'm enthused, energized about getting here in the morning."

With more than half of the station's budget coming from state and federal funding, it's Olson's role to try and revive and improve upon community support in the form of partnerships and pledges from members.

The membership is key and the most important source of revenue for the public television station, he said. In the past when he's dealt with budgets as part of his job, they were for people's time, not money.

"The biggest part is getting my arms around the financial piece," Olson said.

Though he's worked in both small and large news operations, the KSMQ dynamic feels like more of a team, he said. They all help each other out, and he likes that. It's also a balancing act for him to extend an offer to help and to know when to step back, because "keeping my fingers out of the productions is a challenge."

He said he hangs out in the edit suites, but the station has good storytellers, and he has to just let them tell their stories.

"There's great talent here," Olson said. "It's a conscious choice for them. It's a passion for them."

Olson and his family have already jumped right in to being part of Austin. His son Hugh is a sixth-grader at Ellis Middle School and was part of the recent "Wizard of Oz" play. His daughter Claire is a junior at Austin High School and is involved in concert choir.

They've found a church to attend, where Olson will pursue his interest in choral singing. He also wants to get involved with Rotary and Kiwanis clubs. His family is also at the YMCA "darn near every night," and they've been to most of the Austin boys basketball games, which has helped him feel like a part of Austin's community.

"I love basketball," Olson said. "I think events like that are a great way to learn about a community."

Other than "Go Packers!" (which works for both Austin and Green Bay in his case, because he's from Wausau, Wis.), Olson wants to let the community to keep in mind the unique value KSMQ has as a PBS station.

"I'm eager to tell their stories," Olson said. "We do important work."