

A MAN OF MANY HATS



Photo: José Grisales

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At 6:00 a.m., you can hear the dangling of a set of keys as Michael Max Knobbe walks through a quiet hallway of a sub-cellar. He reaches out for one of the 30-something keys and opens a door. At first, it gives the impression he is one of the maintenance workers at Lehman College—but why dressed-up in a French-cuff shirt and tie? Then, he proceeds to an office; sits on a chair; picks up the remote control and tunes to a Bronxnet channel.

Seated near his telephone, which rings once every three minutes, and surrounded by files and financial reports that lie on his desk, Knobbe strikes on his computer keyboard as he types his first memo of the day. Suddenly, he is interrupted by his secretary who reminds him of important meetings. At this point, there is no doubt Knobbe is performing executive duties rather than cleaning ones.

As of September 1, Michael Max Knobbe is interim executive director of Bronxnet, the non-profit, public access television station in the Bronx located in Carman Hall on the Lehman College campus. Bronxnet, which serves to over 275,000 households (in the Bronx) that subscribe to Cablevision, emerged in the late '80s by an agreement between the City of New York and Cablevision. "The station has a dual mission: to provide local programming to the people of the Bronx and to train those who are interested in producing their own shows," explains Knobbe.

Heading Bronxnet from the sub-cellar of a three-story building, Knobbe supervises over 40 employees including full-time and part-time staff, interns as well as five departments within the station. However, his biggest challenge is to increase revenues so that Bronxnet can continue to provide good quality shows to the people in The Bronx

Currently, the station broadcasts 24 hours a day on channels 67 through 70 and offers a variety of shows that focus on public affairs, entertainment, foreign language and informational programs. In addition, Bronxnet is a training facility for high school and college students who pursue studies in the television field.

Knobbe just got promoted after Jim Carney, former executive director of Bronxnet, decided to assume a position as

professor of mass communication at Lehman College. "We were looking for someone with different types of skills and experiences unique to leading a public access facility. Someone who recognizes the station's mission understands the importance of local community media and knows how to create it. And that was Michael Knobbe," says Carney, who served the station for 8 years. A week later—the same day Knobbe got back from his three-day vacation—Carney informed him of his appointment. "When I asked him 'Are you well rested,' he replied, 'Yes' and I said, 'Good because your life is about to change!'. I remember seeing Michael smiling; he looked surprised, shocked, but at the same time excited," Carney adds.

At the age of 33, Knobbe was just few days away from heading a company for the first time in his life. "When Jim Carney informed me, at first, I felt tension and a responsibility. Then, it was all about what I needed to do to get things ready for the company," expresses Knobbe. At the same time, he was getting his syllabus ready to teach the following Tuesday. "I was supposed to teach two classes...With this new charge, I could only teach one; so that's what I decided to do," adds Knobbe, who is also an adjunct professor of mass communication at Lehman College since '99. Currently, he instructs a section of cinema history, which involves analyzing and discussing films from 1940s to the present.

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his biggest challenge is to increase revenues so that Bronxnet can continue to provide good quality shows to the people in The Bronx. According to Knobbe, Bronxnet's revenues for 2002 are about \$1.5 million, mostly from cable subscribers, but also from strategic partnerships, underwriting, grants and video production services. The New York State Council and The Art and Department of Cultural Affairs are some of the companies that have recently provided grants. According to Carney, Knobbe has many elements to be successful: "He has the energy, talent, creativity and artistic skills that can help Bronxnet grow. On top of all, Michael has been with the organization since its inception."

Knobbe's appointment to acting executive director was not a mere coincidence. He began in Bronxnet in 1993 after responding to an ad from a local paper for a position as a computer graphic artist. Simultaneously, he was earning his Masters in Painting, Computer Graphics and Printmaking and teaching Computer Graphics at Lehman.

Showing the company some of his recent work with graphic designs like brochures, posters and logos, Knobbe was soon hired by Fred Weiss, program director at the time, and the first person to recognize Knobbe's potential. "When he showed me his portfolio, immediately I could tell he had good creative talent," says Weiss. Knobbe's first job in Bronxnet was working with the Message Board, a calendar of events displayed daily on a television screen that informs the community about local events,

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