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Star Bulletin



Vol. 10, Issue 322 - Friday, November 18, 2005

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TELEVISION



HARRINGTON PHOTOGRAPHY/ VINCE SHINN
 Matt Levi, left, films a segment for "The Levi Report" at Magic Island.

Taking isle TV to the edge

Ex-reporter and private eye Matt Levi tries his hand at a gritty local newsmagazine

By Burl Burlingame
 bburlingame@starbulletin.com

Although it's been more than a decade and a half since local investigator Matt Levi appeared on Hawaii TV, and about a minute and a half since documentary producer Edgy Lee had something on local TV, the new partners seem to have hammered out a satisfactory working relationship.

"I do the investigation, Edgy does the production and we

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...the production and to share in the writing," says the notoriously close-mouthed Levi. "Team effort, you know?"

"The Levi Report"

Debuts 9 p.m. Tuesday on KHON

Their first effort, "The Levi Report," debuts at 9 p.m. Tuesday on KHON. Levi says, "Channel 2 deserves a lot of credit for backing a report like this, with such divisive public interest in some of the stories."

Based on the planned subject matter, it could easily have been called "The Edgy Report" -- riding along with federal marshals busting Hawaii's Most Wanted, going undercover to expose Internet predators, illustrating a connection between the disappearance of ancient Hawaiian artifacts and illegal drug transactions, a glowing profile of Hawaii musical prodigy Michael Foumai ...

OK, that last one isn't as grim as the others -- "We all wanted to do a story that made people proud of their community," says Levi, but it's still fairly dark waters for sweeps periods.

Edgy Lee, who got her nickname for her cutting-edge attitude, points out that the show has only two sponsors, HMSA and OHA, meaning that KHON considers it programming for public good.

"Pressure's on! And they say they want us to produce it for them four times a year," she says. "Extraordinary. We live in a time of homogenization -- jelly comes in packets, for gosh sakes, exactly the same everywhere, we all eat the same, read the same, watch the same -- and TV news is no exception. The media follows suit. The local TV news is all the same."



RICHARD WALKER / RWALKER@STARBULLETIN.COM
 Filmmaker Edgy Lee, left, oversees editing for the show with Carrie Keller, a designer/editor with Island Post and Graphics. Behind them is Noel Pietsch, field producer.

Dark content aside, KHON is high on the show. Marketing Director Linda Brock says the station values past documentaries that Lee has produced to air on KHON. "Edgy and Matt bring a lot of integrity and passion for Hawaii to this project."

KHON2 News Director Ron Comings emphasizes that "The Levi Report" is not a product of the station's news department. "It's a situation very similar to the network newsmagazine shows that use independent producers who do not work on the daily newscasts. However, since the early stages we have

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Jason

exercised a journalistic overview of the project."

Lee and Levi first teamed up on a groundbreaking documentary about the dangers of "ice" addiction that aired on all local channels. It was a good working experience, and they realized that the medium could reach many, many people. "All the people who are nameless, the people with no voice, we are the only ones who speak for them," says Lee. "Matt's extensive background in television journalism, plus he's a great private investigator, plus my skills, we can really address the problems facing the state no one else is covering."

Talking about the current crop of stories, Lee gets most agitated over Internet predators. What she learned shocked her.

"There are investigators posing as young girls in chat rooms, and within minutes -- minutes! -- there are guys making sexual comments, trying to get these girls to meet them. They know how to manipulate these girls, who even fall in love with these predators. We use a hidden camera while a guy is busted trying to rendezvous with a little girl. Not only that, while you're in a chat room, your computer is wide open for hackers. The Internet reveals all sorts of intimate details stored on your computer.

"Hawaii is no longer isolated. The world has come into your living room and into your child's bedroom."

Ratings will decide how "The Levi Report" fares, although community support appears good. "We want to raise the bar on local programming, to address issues that are timely, the thing local TV news isn't doing because they can't afford the time or resources," says Lee. "It's raw, it's gritty and hopefully it will perk interests in local audiences, who will say, 'It's about time.'"



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