

Bergamo, longtime TV exec, dies



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Ron Bergamo, a longtime television executive who most recently ran KAZT-TV, Channel 27 in Phoenix, died in a head-on collision east of Prescott Valley, the police department said Monday. He was 64.

Bergamo, a Phoenix native who also ran KSAZ-TV, Channel 10, from 1988 to 1995, was struck by an oncoming vehicle that crossed the center line at highway speed Sunday around noon, said Laura Molinaro, a commander with the Prescott Valley Police Department.

Bergamo was returning from his weekend home in Prescott, said Jack Londen, owner of KAZT, known commonly as AZ-TV

"He had such a good reputation for actually two things," Londen said from his Phoenix office. "For running a good station and for absolute integrity. He was a Christian gentleman."

Bergamo's vehicle was struck by another car driven by a 52-year-old Prescott Valley woman. That woman was flown to Flagstaff Medical Center with critical injuries, police said. Her passenger, a four-year-old girl who was in a child safety seat, was injured, but was expected to survive.

Weather did not appear to be a factor in the accident, police said.

Bergamo wife, Jane, was flown to Phoenix's Good Samaritan hospital with life-threatening injuries, police said. She was listed in critical but stable condition Monday.

Bergamo grew up in Phoenix and attended the University of Arizona in Tucson. He worked at CBS affiliates in Wichita, Kan., and Beaumont, Texas, before returning to his hometown to become general manager of Channel 10, the then-CBS station for the Phoenix market.

Bergamo, known for an unfailing enthusiasm and love of the state, oversaw the switching

of the station's call letters from KTSP-TV to KSAZ-TV, standing for the "Spirit of Arizona."

Bergamo also saw the station through a rocky transition from CBS to the then-upstart Fox Network. That move was prompted by a change in ownership of the station.

At the time, the shakeup appeared devastating. A *Republic* television critic framed it as exchanging longtime news anchor Dan Rather for cartoon character Homer Simpson.

Bergamo took the news with his trademark optimism. "I'm good. I'm fine. I'm really pumped," Bergamo was quoted as saying in 1994. "There's excitement about Fox, and all that brings to the table."

Kevin McCabe, the Fox Sports host who was a sports anchor at KSAZ-TV during that time, said Bergamo's optimism kept morale high even as ratings sagged. "He kept everybody's chin up during that time," he said. "It was a weird time and scary, and here was this leader."

Bergamo added a three-hour local news show in the morning and started an hour-long prime time newscast to fill up the gap left by a void in programming offered by Fox.

Bergamo had an eye for talent. He hired John Hook and Troy Hayden, anchors who are still with the station. He also lured Jude LaCava away from a nighttime radio sports show on KTAR-AM and onto the television screen.

"His imprint is still felt here in many ways," said LaCava, the main sports anchor at KSAZ-TV.

Although Bergamo worked for media ownership groups, LaCava said Bergamo kept the spirit of being a local broadcaster who felt a deep responsibility to his community.

"He held this business in high regard," LaCava said. "He cherished it. It was in his blood."

KSAZ-TV lost half its viewers in the year following the network changeover. The station's 5 and 6 p.m. newscasts, which had been in first place the previous year, had slipped to third place. The station was ranked last among 10 p.m. newscasts.

Yet Bergamo called a staff meeting and handed out T-shirts that said "Channel 10 - Number One," said Hayden, who was a reporter at the time. "He was a cheerleader. He sold it," Hayden said.

Bergamo resigned from KSAZ in June 1995.

Two years later, Bergamo became general manager of Tucson's KWBA-TV, Channel 58, an affiliate of the WB Network.

In 2002, Londen bought AZ-TV and tapped Bergamo to take the general manager spot.

"We wouldn't have bought that station had we not made a deal with Ron," Londen said. "His leadership was outstanding because he was always smiling and laughing."

The station was originally based in Prescott, broadcasting as KUSK-TV, Channel 7. It moved its headquarters to Phoenix and transmitted a signal over Channel 27, said Michael Haggerty, the station's programming and promotion director.

Londen credited Bergamo's acumen for helping turn the small station into a player in the Phoenix and Prescott markets.

"I think it's the human side of Ron that everyone fell for. He just had a heart full of gold," Londen said. "And all you had to do was be around him to realize that."

Bergamo served on several boards and councils. He was recently named the chairman of the Cronkite Endowment Board of Trustees, a group that serves as an advisory board for the journalism school at Arizona State University.

"You would have a hard time being sad around Ron Bergamo," said Chris Callahan, dean of the journalism school. "He was just always optimistic, always upbeat. He had a great passion for the industry."

Bergamo was survived by three sons. Information on funeral arrangements was not available Monday.