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From volunteers with love: 200 make spy-themed Trivia Weekend their mission

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(Photo: Jason Wachter,
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After almost 40 years of hosting Trivia Weekend — which starts Friday — the planning team and event volunteers at KVSC 88.1 FM have gotten very, very good at the gig.

"We get something like 100,000 calls over the weekend," said Jo McMullen-Boyer, station manager. "It takes roughly 200 people, on our end, to pull the weekend together."

To support the 2,000 people (on roughly 50 teams) who will play Trivia Weekend this year, McMullen-Boyer and her team need volunteers — a lot of them.

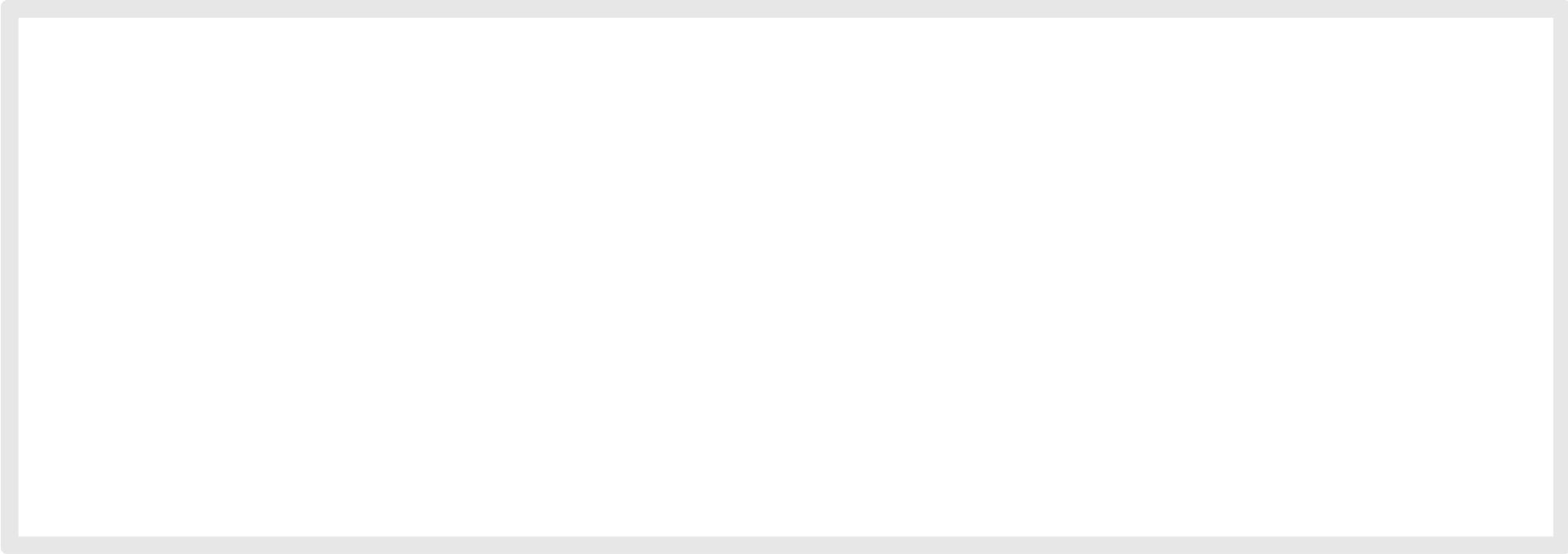
It's not just answering phones, either. While 25-30 people are needed to man the phone bank each hour, volunteers are also needed to cover the event on-air, from KVSC's own coverage to the college television station.

And then there are the question-writers.

"These are people who are just creatively insane," laughed McMullen-Boyer, "and I say that with much respect."

The writers are an eclectic bunch of intellectuals and pop culture junkies, ranging from the former chief jailer of Stearns County to a movie theater manager, according to McMullen-Boyer. They're responsible for creating 450 questions, some of which may be audio or visual trivia, for use over the weekend.

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"Year-round, they're finding quirky, odd, interesting things (for questions)," McMullen-Boyer said of the writing team. "I think they're always writing questions. They just know what they're looking for."

McMullen-Boyer said questions can range from something spotted in the Country Music Hall of Fame to an obscure fact from a science journal published 50 years ago — as long as they're legitimately sourced, which typically means looking beyond the internet.

"The internet is not sacred, as we all know," McMullen-Boyer said. "Anyone can put anything out there. We usually double or even triple-source things."

Want an example of what the trivia teams are up against each year? Imagine having 25 minutes to solve a question like, "In 'Medea,' Ancient Greek playwright Euripedes tells the story of a scorned woman who takes revenge on her former husband by killing their children. In which episode of the early-aughts dramedy 'Gilmore Girls' can a poster for a production of 'Medea' be seen? A full answer includes the season, episode number and name."

Um ... can we phone a friend?

According to McMullen-Boyer, the writers are also making mischief guided by this year's theme: "Strategies, Secrets, and Spies."

"This year, because of the theme, we're giving everyone an encrypted thumb drive," McMullen-Boyer said. "They have to decipher a code in order to see the images for some visual trivia. We're just being naughty."

But even McMullen-Boyer can't be certain what tricks the trivia writers have up their sleeves.

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"They don't always bring me in!" she laughed. "My gut tells me to be prepared to decipher some kind of code. They might lead you from one question to another. They're going to take you down a path, and you'll need the correct answer from one question to get to one for another ... I'm just speculating! But that's what I suspect."

Jim Gray, operations director at KVSC, said the process of choosing this year's theme involved looking at years past.

"The spy theme had been thrown out there a couple of times over the last three or four years, and it was one that was really close to being the theme for last year," Gray said. "And when we come up with these ideas, it's not just 'Hey, that's kind of fun.' It's 'How do we play that out? How is it different?'"

Gray and others at KVSC, including alumni groups, "looked back at (their) history to see if (they had) done anything similar."

"Back in the late 80's there was 'Mission: Trivia,' as in 'Mission: Impossible,'" Gray said. "So we really wanted to make sure we did this one differently."

Could a different interpretation of the espionage theme mean even more high-tech gadgets that would have been unavailable in the 80's, like McMullen-Boyer's encrypted thumb drive? The KVSC team remains tight-lipped. But Gray could say to expect general knowledge questions that subtly relate back to the theme.

"It's one of those things where if you're into it, you'll be really into it, and if you're not into it, it won't be so heavy-handed as to bother you," he said.

All efforts coalesce Friday through Sunday, when teams will settle in for a weekend of trivia more in the vein of extreme sports than your average bar scene.

For both the teams and the volunteers, the weekend "is about endurance," McMullen-Boyer said.

"Especially the teams who have been playing this for years — they plan, they have spreadsheets, they know how to manage this," she said.

And for the volunteers? It's all worth it when they hear teams cheer on the other end of the phone after scoring some major points.

"If a 150-point question is open for 25 minutes, and you get in by the hair of your chinny chin chin, it's like getting a three-pointer at the end of the game. You've made it," McMullen-Boyer laughed. "It's exciting!"

When it's all over and the coveted Minnesota Masters of Trivia Traveling Trophy (whew!) is given to its new owners, the KVSC team and all the volunteers can bask in a job well done — briefly. Gray said they receive only a few months' reprieve before planning for next year's 40th anniversary weekend begins.

"There's an unwritten rule around here," Gray chuckled. "After trivia, we don't talk about trivia for a while, because we're very sick of trivia."

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