



## 's Michele Norris Swings Into PA's Most Influential Swing District

In the middle of a hectic afternoon last October, with the phone ringing constantly and a deadline looming, I had decided to let voice mail take my calls for the rest of the day when the caller ID caught my attention: "National Public Radio," read the display, followed by a strangely familiar, velvety voice on the machine, saying, "Hello, this is Michele Norris (ME-shell, as in the Beatles song), from *All Things Considered*."

As a speaker, writer, and lecturer, I spend many hours on the road, often on unfamiliar ground, driving to my next engagement. During these times, NPR is my guide star and my companion, the constant that I count on no matter where I am in the country. Familiar voices waft from the rental car radio, detail the day's events, and reassure me that the world didn't end while I was working. How could I resist this call?

When I answered, Norris explained that NPR would be doing a year-long series of reports leading up to the 2004 presidential elections. These reports would reflect voter sentiment in two important swing states, Pennsylvania and Florida. Within both states, the NPR crew would focus on one region's voters, returning there again and again as the election cycle progressed. NPR had chosen Lehigh County, one of the most consistent swing districts in the commonwealth, to represent Pennsylvania. Norris was looking for someone who could convey what was happening "on the ground" in Lehigh County throughout the coming year. She knew I wrote a newspaper column and was very involved in the community, and she asked for my help.

After a nearly hour-long phone conversation about politics, journalism, and the future of NPR (with a little girl talk thrown in for good measure), this nationally known reporter and radio host had made me feel like a colleague. It is no wonder her interviews reach right through the radio and into your psyche. Her warmth, charm, and intelligence slowly drop over you like a gossamer net, until you're ensnared.

After conducting dozens of interviews in Lehigh County, NPR aired the first segment November seventh, 2003 (available online at [www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org); search for "Lehigh County.") They hope to return again in mid-April, before the primary election, and visit at least a couple of times more before the general election in November. In December 2003, Norris agreed to this *LV* interview about her work in the county.

**PV:** Let's talk about the process that NPR, and you, went through to get to the Lehigh Valley.

**MN:** We started looking at the electoral map. We thought it would be interesting to go to one of the states that was closely contested in 2000, and look forward, to see what the chessboard looked like going into 2004.

We settled on Pennsylvania for lots of reasons. The race there was so interesting in 2000. We looked at Pittsburgh, Montgomery County and the Philadelphia suburbs, and Lehigh County. Lehigh County stood out

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to us. You have fast-growing suburbs, the tension between old and new economies, and many of the things that give Pennsylvania its unique character. Pennsylvania has a large elderly population, and that's true of Lehigh County also. Gun ownership is an important electoral issue in the state and the county.

It's also fascinating that the voters of Lehigh County are à la carte voters—a Democrat here, a Republican there. They don't affiliate with blind party allegiance. They vote for the candidate who speaks to their interest on a particular issue, at a particular time. In a divided party system, you don't see that much.

Another interesting factor is that Lehigh County, and Fountain Hill in Bethlehem, have been phenomenally accurate in picking winners—in picking *the* winner in the past two decades.

**PV:** We've picked the winner in the presidential race all but three times in the past fifty years.



**MN:** There's a bit of lore we're eager to verify about Fountain Hill, near Saint Ursula's. When President Kennedy was running, and it was close, he was on pins and needles to find out how he had done. (This was before exit polls and computerized results.) Then, as now, Pennsylvania was key to victory. Kennedy knew Fountain Hill was famously accurate at picking winners. He asked one of his lieutenants to try to get an early read on the voting there, because the legend went, "As Fountain Hill goes, so goes the election." He felt confident that if he took this precinct, he'd march into the White House. They called, and he had won Fountain Hill, and he did win the election.

**PV:** How many times will you and your crew come to the Valley?

**MN:** It's a question of resources and the news cycle. Ideally, I would like to do at least six stories. I don't know if I'll do it in six trips or if I'll harvest a couple of stories in one. I'd like to be even more present than that, but we keep in touch through e-mail and by reading all the papers in the region.

**PV:** What kind of gut impression did you come away with from your first trip to our part of the world?

**MN:** I saw a community in transition. I saw interesting ethnic integration patterns that you see more and more throughout America. I'm eager to see how that's playing out in the schools and communities. It will be interesting to see if the new population lines up politically as a community or if there are the splits like you see in every other ethnic community.

There are new homes sprouting up, new business parks. It seems that in Lehigh County, some very smart people made key decisions when they lost major manufacturing, and scrambled pretty quickly to make sure the county survived by attracting a new economic base.

The fate of the Bethlehem Steel workers is fascinating to me. I'm doing some



National Public Radio commentator Michele Norris in NPR's Washington, D.C., studio.





They're wondering about health care, they're worried about their pensions.

Radio resonates. It's very powerful to practice this kind of journalism, to know you're not talking *at* people; you're talking *to* them. You're introducing them to people who will stay with them. Six months after a story, people write and ask, "How is that person doing?" We get letters like that daily. **PV:** You're a woman who has made it in a very demanding industry. What words of wisdom do you have for women who are looking to be journalists? As one of the most successful people in the industry, what can you tell them?

**MN:** I don't think I would reduce that to one piece of advice. I would say a few things. One, if you want to be a journalist, write! Write early, write often, write letters, keep a diary. If you're in school, work for the school newspaper, and I say this to someone who wants to work in print or in broadcasting, because it's all about writing.

The ability to write is like a muscle; if you don't use it, it atrophies. If you do use it, it becomes stronger every day. Write. Get published, even if it's in the school newspaper. Every step you take, you have a clip you can give someone, you have a byline.

Second, write your future in pencil. Never let anyone tell you what path to take, or that you have to work in *this* market before you get to *that* market. Journalism today is so much different than it was twenty years ago, when I first got into the business. The Internet has changed everything. There's so much more cross-pollination. You'll do a lot of different things; you'll wear a lot of different hats. I'm not saying don't take advice. Every single person you encounter in this world has something to teach you. But don't believe you have a path you have to follow. If you had asked me twenty years ago if I'd be working in radio, I would have laughed. But every step along the way, a new opportunity came up.

**PV:** You started out in electrical engineering at the University of Minnesota. Please do give us a sentence or two on that transition.

**MN:** I always liked sciences: biology, chemistry, physics. When I was in high school, they had a program called "Inroads," where you were allowed to take early college courses on the weekends. It was aimed at getting under-represented groups interested in going to college, populations like women and minorities, and I was both of

those things. It was really great, because I was able to go to the University of Minnesota on the weekends. I spent a summer in Minnesota, working at a company that makes pacemakers. The work was fascinating, but isolating. You worked in a clean room and saw the same people every day. I felt this wanderlust to see the world.

In college, I dedicated a semester to taking some courses outside the school of engineering. I took an English course, and the professor said, "You really are a good writer. You should consider this as a career." I decided to change my major, and it gave my parents heart attacks. Engineers built things. Journalists publish the stuff you wrap the fish in on Friday. I found a couple internships that would enable me to get a paying job. It turned out to be a good move. **PV:** I still haven't heard about how you manage to be so successful at both your career and your family?

**MN:** For any woman juggling career and family, it's the equivalent of juggling chain saws. It's like someone is just outside the frame of the picture throwing more at you, yelling, "Catch! Can you deal with this?!"

If you're going to try to do it all and have it all, you must have in your arsenal six ways to politely say "no, not now, I couldn't possibly, or not this time." You need to learn how to say "no," so you can say "yes" to other things with gusto, and give the things that matter most to you 100 percent. You have to be a good manager of yourself and protect yourself. There are only twenty-four hours in a day and only so much energy you can expend, before you're spent.

**PV:** What's next? Do you see yourself with NPR twenty years from now?

**MN:** As long as they'll have me. It's the kind of place where people stay for years. I just said, "Write your future in pencil," so I don't know; but I'm not in a hurry to go anywhere else. The name of the show is, "All Things Considered," so you don't get bored. You learn something new every day. I'll be interested to see what I'm doing in ten years, but I would gladly still be here because it is such a wonderful place to be.

**PV:** I do have one more question that I absolutely have to ask. There seems to be a polarization of the media, especially in radio. So much information and talk radio is conservative-based. Al Franken is supposedly going to be doing some sort of liberal-based show on a new network.

Bernard Goldberg has brought out his second book, charging bias in the media. Where do you come down on this? And where do you feel NPR is positioned in that debate?

**MN:** I'm always uncomfortable with labels, liberal versus conservative. The label I aspire to is fair, balanced, accurate. Liberal, conservative, you're talking opinion at that point. You're talking agendas. Many people have decided to cast us as a liberal news organization, but I always tell people to listen to what we do, and judge us based on what we actually broadcast.

If you look at our listenership, it is almost a dead-on representation of the American electorate, meaning it is almost evenly divided among those who identify themselves as Democrats, Republicans, and Independents. Some, who identify themselves as conservative Republicans, listen not because they're looking for opinions or a particular slant. They listen because what they get is news, and a depth in reporting that they don't find elsewhere.

The opinions that matter most to me are those of the listeners. If the listeners were complaining about the bias they hear in our coverage, that would cause me to pay attention. The folks that are labeling us with a capital "L" are the people who are proudly wearing a capital "C."

Many news organizations are defined in different ways—news programs that are opinion based, based on commentary. Those people are pundits, they're people who express their O-P-I-N-I-O-N-S, as part of the news cycle. I try very hard not to get pulled into that because I'm not a pundit, I'm a journalist. I may talk to pundits. And on "All Things Considered," we do include commentary. It's interesting because if we include someone like Ken Adelman, we'll get letters from people saying, "How can you have someone that conservative on NPR?" On the other hand, when Dan Shore does a piece that is very critical of the administration, we'll get letters saying, "How can you have that person on the air?"

The point is: We have both. And that is the key to NPR. **LV**

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