

RADIO

Garrison Keillor's wish to be heard is at the heart of standoff with MPR

By Jeffrey Meitrodt
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Garrison Keillor is convinced America still wants to hear his voice.

The disgraced broadcaster's determination to reopen the "Prairie Home Companion" archives and revive his daily "Writer's Almanac" is at the heart of the bitter divorce talks with Minnesota Public Radio that broke down last week in an acrimonious exchange.

Both sides say they want to resolve the two-month standoff over what MPR termed "dozens of sexually inappropriate incidents" by Keillor toward a longtime writer for "Prairie Home."

Much is at stake. The archives, removed from MPR's website on Nov. 29, reflect more than 40 years of work — 1,500 episodes of "PHC" and thousands of episodes of "Writer's Almanac," which has helped promote unsung poets around the country for 25 years. MPR said late last week that it "is committed to an agreement that restores access to the materials that are important to our listeners and others." Those archives were removed from MPR's website on Nov. 29, when the company announced its investigation of Keillor found he had engaged in "inappropriate behavior" with a female employee.

But the most challenging issue may be Keillor's insistence that he somehow clear his name, or at least lift the cloud that is making it difficult for him to continue publishing and staging shows around the country.

"What Garrison wants to accomplish is opening the doors and windows to his future — as a novelist, as a speaker," said Eric Nilsson, Keillor's attorney, who has spent several weeks in mediation with MPR. "That is his goal. As you can appreciate, his life has been upended by what has transpired here. The mission is to get his train back on track. And I am confident we can do that."

Nilsson said Keillor wants to return to the bargaining table. MPR officials declined to answer questions about the status of negotiations, noting in a statement that the company and Keillor "signed a written agreement agreeing to the confidentiality of the process."

Keillor announced Friday that he also is seeking payment of unfiled contractual obliga-



In this May 21, 2016, photo, Garrison Keillor appears during a live broadcast for "A Prairie Home Companion" at the State Theatre in Minneapolis. "What Garrison wants to accomplish is opening the doors and windows to his future," lawyer Eric Nilsson said. LELANAVID/STAR TRIBUNE

tions related to his broadcasts. "MPR has paid about half of what they owe me," he said in a Facebook post. Nilsson declined to say how much is owed, but said the publicity surrounding MPR's actions also cost Keillor "significant appearance commitments and other compensable opportunities for his work."

He said Keillor has generated tens of millions of dollars for MPR over the years through the sale of his programming to other public radio stations, as well as pledge drives, ticket sales and sponsorships. With as many as 4 million weekly listeners, "Prairie Home" dominated the public radio airwaves for 40 years, helping MPR become one of the largest public stations in the country with revenue now reaching about \$100 million annually.

MPR President Jon McTaggart told MPR News that the company had received a "monetary demand from Garrison," but company officials declined to elaborate.

Keillor not seeking apology

Keillor and MPR entered mediation about a month ago, but talks came to an abrupt halt last Tuesday when McTaggart issued what Nilsson called a "shocking" public rebuke that included graphic details of Keillor's alleged misconduct.

The letter came out as several media organizations, including the Star Tribune, were preparing to publish investigations revealing additional women who claim to have received inappropriate messages from him.

Until the release of McTaggart's statement, the only explanation for the break between MPR and Keillor came from the star himself, who told the Star Tribune the whole thing related to a failed

attempt to console a writer, when he inadvertently placed his hand on her bare back.

McTaggart said the company offered more details because Keillor's explanation was "misinformation" aimed to create the impression that "MPR did not handle these matters thoughtfully." In his statement, he said the woman's attorney detailed a number of alleged incidents over several years in a 12-page letter to MPR that included "excerpts of e-mails and written messages, requests for sexual contact and explicit descriptions of sexual communications and touching."

Nilsson said the move "came as a complete surprise to us, given the fact that we were still in mediation. ... From our perspective, we were making progress."

He acknowledged that major sticking points remain.

"What is at issue in the current climate is restoration of Garrison's reputation," he said. "We live in an unsettled environment. People perceive risk in association with anyone against whom the mere allegation of 'inappropriate behavior' between sexes has been made. ... Some outlets for Garrison's work have fallen prey to this mentality. For his work to be fully enjoyed again by a ready readership and audience, he needs to overcome this unfortunate trend."

It's unclear, however, what MPR can do that would satisfy him. Nilsson said Keillor is not seeking a public apology.

"Too much water has poured over the dam in this unfortunate episode to expect a formal apology," Nilsson said. "To receive an apology would be restorative. To demand one would be bad form on a low road. Garrison's best years as a writer have just begun. In the end, his writing — and his readers — will win the day."

Restoring public access to the archives should be simpler. While MPR said it can no longer provide access because Keillor owns "many of the rights to the shows' artistic content," Nilsson said Keillor is willing to take whatever steps are necessary to make those archives available again.

Pulling the shows angered some "Prairie Home" performers and writers, who noted that movies starring actor Kevin Spacey or produced by Harvey Weinstein were not suddenly made unavailable in the wake of their public shaming.

"There is a lot of collateral damage out here," said Sue Scott, who spent 24 years performing on the show. "I'm not saying this accuser wasn't traumatized. But there are people out there who have done a lot worse — and their entire body of work is still out there."

Museum could house archive

Even if MPR agrees to cooperate, Nilsson said a permanent repository is needed for Keillor's extensive archives, such as a museum or university library.

Two major collectors of old TV and radio programs said they would be interested in housing the archives.

"I would certainly consider it because it is historically valuable," said Laura Schmitz, curator of the Mass Media and Culture collection at the University of Maryland, which has an extensive collection of material from National Public Radio. "Whether the material is controversial or not is not necessarily our first priority. I think researchers from all backgrounds would benefit from studying this groundbreaking program, which in many ways is unique."

It may be more difficult to find a station willing to restart "A Writer's Almanac," a five-minute show in which Keillor recaps the day's historical highlights and reads a short poem or two.

"I don't think Garrison has a future on public radio," said Julie Drizin, executive director of Current, a trade journal that covers public broadcasting. "I think program directors will choose not to put him on the air and will dissociate from him. I think they will do that as a way of showing solidarity with the women who have been brave enough to tell their stories. I think they will not want to alienate female staff and female listeners."