

After more than 500 shows,  
Dennis McCuiston and Niki Nicastro  
still do programs about

“...things that matter  
people who care...”

by edward southerland

About ten minutes into the program a loud, chirping fire alarm went off in the studio at KERA-TV, Channel 13, and everything came to a halt. There was no fire, just noise. After a minute or two, the alarm stopped, only to start again in a few moments. It was ten minutes before things were sorted out.

There was a benefit in the mishap, however. The guest, a man in a gray suit and baggy brown socks, had been hit with an attack of flop sweat when the red light on the camera blinked on. The perspiration had beaded up on his face, and his forehead was glistening. The interruption gave the makeup woman an opportunity to come on the set and dry him off. Taking off his jacket and complaining loudly about the heat from the studio lights, the guest, who had been thirty minutes late for makeup and was grumpy, decided to finish the show sans coat.

The floor director politely pointed out that when the show aired, it would appear that the jacket had suddenly—magically it would seem to the viewers—disappeared, so the coat went back on. Finally, all was put back in order, the imaginary fire extinguished, or at least the alarm thought so, the guest acclimated to the lights, which weren't all that hot after all, and the taping started again.

The host, **Dennis McCuiston**, who has been doing this sort of thing for twenty years and is well schooled in the vagaries of television, was not particularly bothered. He watched the rerun of the tape up to the point the alarm sounded, and when the floor director gave the countdown and the action

sign, he looked into the camera and restated the question the guest had been answering. The guest, who was prepared to name names in the collapse of the housing market, soldiered on, and in forty-five minutes or so another *McCuiston Program* was in the can.

☆☆☆

*The McCuiston Program*—twenty-six shows a year for twenty years and counting on the Dallas PBS outlet, KERA—is available to PBS affiliates all over the country. Though the look and the format are familiar enough, the program is not quite typical for the medium or the venue, nor is Dennis McCuiston as recognizable as some other Public Broadcasting faces, such as Bill Moyers, Charlie Rose, or Tavis Smiley.

Part of this lack of wider recognition may be the show's attitude. McCuiston and *The McCuiston Program* lean more toward the conservative side of the political and social spectrums (McCuiston says his bent is more libertarian) than the mine run of political-opinion programming on this taxpayer subsidized network. His shows also are lower keyed—or at least have a lower decibel rating—than many of the shows featuring what passes for discussion on television today. While he strives to present multiple sides of an issue, McCuiston disdains the “in your face” style of ballyhoo favored by some broadcasters and avoids the loud, the magniloquent, and the artificially flamboyant in subjects and in contributors.

More often than not, *The McCuiston Program* is “of the news” rather than “in the news,” and the theme which rises

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**THE GUEST, A MAN IN A GRAY SUIT AND BAGGY BROWN SOCKS, HAD BEEN HIT WITH AN ATTACK OF FLOP SWEAT WHEN THE RED LIGHT ON THE CAMERA BLINKED ON.**

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Talking About Things That Matter  
**McCUISTION**  
With People Who Care

Niki Nicastro and Dennis McCuiston  
on the set of their public affairs  
program at KERA-TV

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quickly, blows hard, and disappears like a summer thunderstorm is rarely on the agenda. The program is summed up in its defining phrase, offered at the end of each broadcast: "Talking about things that matter with people who care."



When he is not traveling and working as banking consultant and motivational speaker, Dennis McCuiston hangs his hat in a house overlooking Lake Texoma. The journey from the small Texas town of Forney to sunsets on the lake has been an interesting one. He came from a family of bankers and followed their path after college, at least for a while. "I'm a recovering banker, a recovering bank CEO," he says each time he describes his background. It's a good line and usually brings a smile from the listener, particularly these days when bankers' images could use a little burnishing.

In 1983, he forsook the bank, but not necessarily the knowledge he had gained in the industry. He was living in Las Colinas and working as a banking consultant—"That's a banker between jobs, or someone who borrows your watch to tell you what time it is"—and traveling the country as a speaker on banking and economic topics. And then along came DART.

The Dallas Area Rapid Transit system was one of dozens of metropolitan public transportation developments that rose out of the environmental and energy concerns of the 1970s. Dallas, whose citizens, like those in other cities outside the Northeast corridor, preferred private cars and pickup trucks to aging and happenstance bus service, was being lobbied to build integrated rail lines and invest in new buses and expanded public transportation, with the generous backing of Washington, of course.

"It was a controversial issue," said McCuiston. "I did some homework on the question and decided it was a bad idea philosophically and economically, and through a series of events, I became the leading voice trying to educate the public as to why this was a bad idea." He was on the point and suddenly in the public eye. "I was on television a lot, wrote a lot of op-ed pieces for the *Dallas Morning News* and the *Times-Herald*, and debated many of the proponents."

McCuiston's facility in defense of his ideas came to the attention of **John McKay**, the general manager of the Dallas CBS Television affiliate, Channel 4. "About a month before the election, McKay did an on-air editorial supporting DART and challenged the audience to call him if they had a different opinion." McCuiston made the call.

"He [McKay] said write it down, type it up, bring it down to the station. We'll put it on the teleprompter, and we'll tape it and run it after the ten-thirty news." When McCuiston sailed through the taping on the first take, the

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*Dennis McCuiston has done 26 shows a year for the past 20 years at KERA-TV.*

crew took notice and passed the word to McKay. "Long story short, we became friends."

McCuiston lost the DART fight, but that didn't keep him from speaking up on issues he found interesting, important or controversial. A couple of years later, he was having lunch with McKay, who by then had left Channel 4 and bought his own station, **KDFI-TV**, Channel 27, a low-budget Dallas independent that ran a mixed bag of reruns, public affairs shows, religious programs and leftovers from the three big networks. Before the check arrived, McKay suggested they do a pilot for a local issues talk show.

"The first program we did was on abortion," recalled McCuiston. "We had a lady who was the number one supporter of abortion rights and a preacher who was absolutely against it, and it was awful. I don't have a copy of the show, and I hope one never turns up." Awful, but with promise, was

more like it, but it was 1985, Texas was in economic turmoil as the oil and gas business spiraled downward, and promise or not, there wasn't any money to push beyond the pilot, so the idea all but died aborning.

#### Enter Niki

**Niki Nicastr** grew up a "Nu Yawker" in a family of college professors and journalists. Her plan was to follow one of these career paths, too, but that future never quite materialized. Married young, with two children—and now five grandchildren—she sold insurance and commercial real estate, moving south to Atlanta just in time to get in on the boom that made suburban Gwinnett County the fastest-growing spot in the country for a while.

Her next move was west to San Diego, and it coincided with a significant career shift. She had moved from selling tangibles, real estate, to selling intangibles, ideas, and had become very active in the National Speakers Association. Speaking out was the connection that brought Dennis and Niki together for the first time in 1983 at a speaker's workshop in San Francisco.

"She doesn't remember the first meeting," said Dennis, "but then we met again in February '86, in Santa Fe. I was on crutches and in a cast from a racquetball accident and sitting at a banquet table with her. What kind of person would ask a person in a cast to dance?"

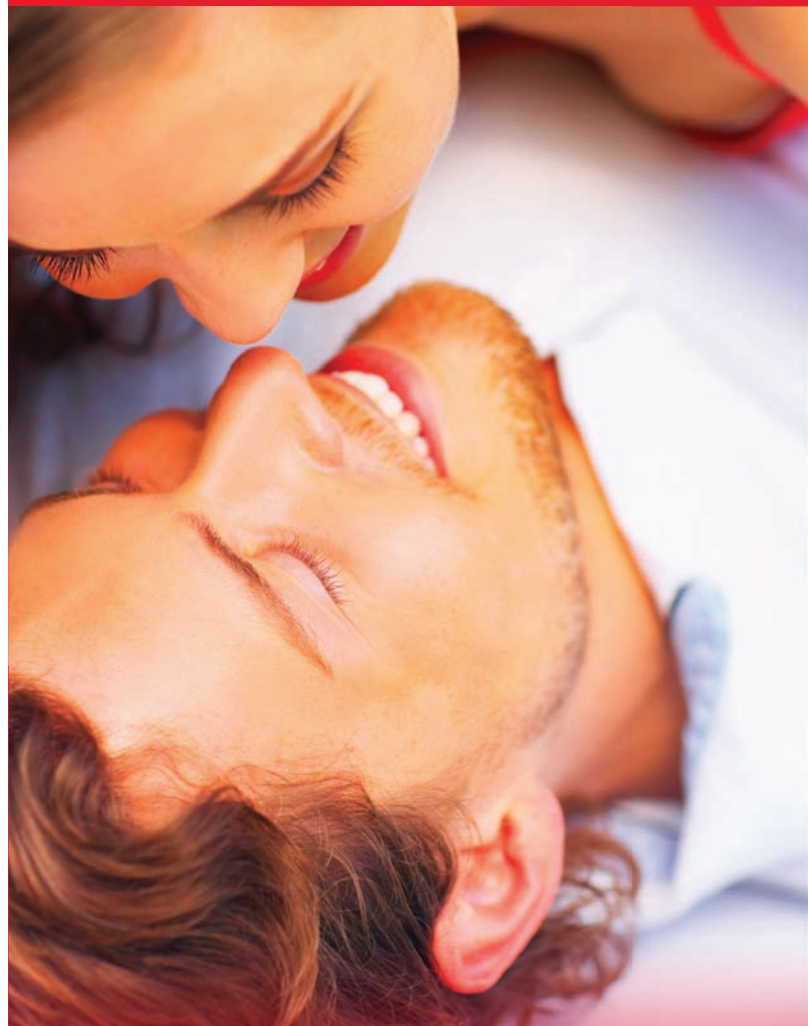
The kind Dennis McCuiston would marry, apparently. "She came through Dallas on her way from Chicago to San Diego in June, and we met again at a convention in July." The romance was of the whirlwind variety, often at long range, as the pair's schedules often found them at opposite ends of the country, but they finally got together long enough to get married in June 1987.

#### Let's do a show

"On one our first dates, we were talking about the future, and the conversation came round to having a television program," recalled Niki. "That sounded like nothing I wanted to be involved with, but he convinced me that we could make more of an impact on television talking about issues, and reach more people than we ever could writing, consulting or speaking."

The couple eventually took their ideas back to John McKay, raised some money, and in 1988, with Niki as the producer and Dennis as the front man and host, produced seven shows for KDFI-TV. The first show was on anxiety and panic attacks and was shot, as were the others, in the stu-

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dios of KERA-TV, the Dallas PBS affiliate. “We had a lot of people with anxiety problems in the audience,” said Dennis, “and one woman on the front row had an accident during the program. She had an incidence of incontinence all over the chair.” It was a somewhat embarrassing welcome to audience-participation television.

The KDFI shows reached a limited audience, but a few people for whom such things mattered were watching. KERA invited McCuiston to appear on a local discussion show to discuss a slate of proposed amendments to the state constitution, and he agreed. During the production, offhand conversations led to introductions, led to meetings, led to “my sister-in-law knows someone in the station management,” led to “why don’t you talk to...,” led to “well, we like your ideas...,” led to “if we had any money...,” led to “if you can provide a show, we’ll provide the air time.”

It took about a year for all the “led tos” to be resolved, and in December 1989, the first episodes of *The McCuiston Program* were taped. Broadcasting began in January 1990. Apparently there was no budget for a really snappy name. That omission was resolved in 1994, when the couple organized The Foundation for Responsible Television, a not-for-profit, 501(c)(3) corporation to facilitate their expanded efforts and ideas.

Two decades later, the beat goes on. Over the years the programs have talked about things that matter—leadership in America, the California energy crisis, who should govern Jerusalem, vouchers in public education, English-only vs. bilingualism, and more, with people who care—Steve Forbes, Sam Donaldson, Jim Lehrer, Robert Reich, and a host of others, some well known, others merely well informed.

The programs are often serious, but not always. “One of the best shows we ever did was on the healing power of humor,” said Dennis. “And there was one on over achievers with an eighty-year-old who was in triathlons. We do serious things, but we also have a lot of fun.”

### The Texoma connection

Some years ago, the McCuistions decided they needed a retreat from stresses of travel, television production, and generally life in the big city. “We had friends up at Lake Texoma. We came up to visit often, and we got to thinking that it would be nice to have a place close to home for some downtime. We’d looked in New Mexico, around Taos, but that was too far, so we started looking for a little cottage on the lake,” recalled Niki.

Not being from around here, Niki didn’t altogether understand that the concept of “cottage” doesn’t quite translate into Texan. Cabin, sure. Shack, definitely, but cottage, not so much. “We were with a realtor going to see a little house on the lake when, as we turned on to the street, I see this ‘For Sale’ sign out of the corner of my eye and said ‘Stop the car! This is it!’”

The “it” was a spacious, multilevel home with decks that looked out over sunsets on the lake. The McCuistions made a deal with the owners that very day and in short order gave up life in the city for life on the lake, full, not part time.



### Meanwhile, back in the studio

Dennis McCuiston still lives on Texoma, but not Niki. The couple split a few years ago, and Dennis has remarried. But while the McCuiston’s domestic situation changed, their professional situation did not. *The McCuiston Program* continues, with plans for a year-long celebration of season twenty in the works. After two decades of questions, opinions and investigations, both McCuistions still have lists of shows they very much want to do, as well as shows that were ill advised from the start and shows they would like to forget.

### The Good

“I’ve wanted to do a series on homosexuality in American,” said Dennis, after some thought. “There are so many sides to it, the religious questions, the biological and social aspect of it, the parenting question, the military issue, and of course the problems with AIDS. It’s such an important topic, and in my opinion it has never gotten a proper examination. We’ve never had the funding to do it right, because it’s going to take more than just what we can do now.”

At the top of Niki’s to-do list is a subject she battles often in her role as producer and facilitator of an issues and opinion television show. “Political correctness,” she said. “It’s hit me personally so many times. We did a show on it once, but it wasn’t as important as it is now. We are going to do something on this topic, and we are going to make a huge splash.”

### The Bad

“There are only two programs we have taped that didn’t air,” said Dennis. “One of them had to do with AIDS. I still think it’s one of the best programs we ever did, although I know Niki disagrees with me on that.”

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“A FEW DAYS AFTER 9/11, I GOT A CALL FROM CHANNEL 13, ASKING IF WE COULD PUT TOGETHER A PROGRAM IN A FEW DAYS ABOUT WHAT HAD HAPPENED. I SAID YES. WE DID A ONE-HOUR SHOW CALLED ‘EVERYTHING YOU EVER WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT TERRORISM’ VERY QUICKLY AND WON AN AWARD FOR IT.”

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“We had a guy on the panel who was gay and had found the Lord, and the church he was in had convinced him that he was no longer gay. He said it on the air, and that didn’t go well with some people here. The show wasn’t about being gay; it was about AIDS, which affects everybody, but Channel 13 didn’t like this guy’s perspective, and they decided not to air it.”

“The other show was about immigration,” said Niki. “A Hispanic man in the audience asked a question or made a comment, and Dennis asked him if he was here legally and all of a sudden there were boos and hisses, and that program didn’t air.”

#### The Ugly

“We did one on hospice, which is a very important topic, but we had a guy on I knew was a loose cannon,” said Dennis. “He was a preacher; he had had every conceivable disease himself and had gotten over it, and he ministered in hospice day in and day out. We were there to talk about hospice, so I told him not to talk about all the diseases he’d had, or allegedly had, and the role of the Lord in curing him, and of course, he went straight to that subject.”

“I knew that guy was trouble,” said Niki. “I should have put my foot down about him,” and then, “We did two programs on the Kennedy assassination. We were asked not to do them by the station, which was planning a big retrospective on the subject, but we did them anyway. They weren’t great; I didn’t want to air them, but...”

“I thought they were just wonderful,” said Dennis.

“...part one aired, and KERA said, “Maybe you shouldn’t air part two.”

“But we aired it.”

“No we didn’t.”

“I’ll tell you what happened. We had a guy who had written a book...”

“It was biased, it was slanted, it was—”

“It was a great show.”

It was time to agree to disagree.

Most of the time the two McCuistions do agree, of course, but the creative battles in which they engage are part of the reason they work well together and the programs they produce are successfully entertaining,

informative, and provocative. But sometimes even that synergism is not enough to overcome outside forces that cannot or will not agree to disagree. The case in point is the most monumental project the team has undertaken as yet. It is primarily Niki’s story.

#### At war over Islam

“A few days after 9/11, I got a call from Channel 13, asking if we could put together a program in a few days about what had happened. I said yes. We did a one-hour show called ‘Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Terrorism’ very quickly and won an award for it.”

The program impressed more than just the members of the awards committee. **Hatton W. Sumners** was an Arkansas native who moved to Dallas in 1895 and read law in the office of the Dallas County District Attorney. Elected to the state legislature in 1913 and to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1915, Sumners represented the Fifth Congressional District until 1947, when he retired. Two years later he started the foundation which bears his name. Sumners died in 1962.

In the early 1990s, the Hatton W. Sumners Foundation became a principal supporter of the McCuistions and their Foundation for Responsible Television. Impressed by the program they had put together days after 9/11, Sumners officials asked if Niki and Dennis would be interested in doing an extended-length documentary exploring Islam and the religious conflicts that had so dramatically burst into public awareness with the attacks in New York and Washington.

It was a no brainer. “I told them, ‘In a New York minute, I’d do that,’” Niki said and set things in motion. “We brought in **Phil Smith**, who shoots and edits for us. I wrote a grant, we got the money, and we started interviews from Baghdad to Lebanon in 2003.”

The McCuistions and Smith spent a month on the ground in the Middle East doing interviews and research and shooting footage for the project. “We did our best to look at both sides of the question, to figure out what were the issues and how we got to 9/11,” said Niki. After the initial investigations, Dennis came home and Niki moved on to Turkey to explore how Islam functioned in the more secular democracy

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of the Turks. Then it was back to Dallas for more research, interviews and the labor intensive process of turning hours of video and audio into a cogent, enlightening and balanced presentation.

Before the project came together, there were more trips to the Middle East as well as multiple excursions to New York and Washington. All in all, the McCuistions and Smith invested more than a year and a half in the program, which was scheduled to air on KERA in four segments, covering topics from Islam and Democracy to the Role of Women in the Middle East, in January 2006. Then KERA decided they would prefer a single, two-hour format, so it was back to the editing room for Niki and Phil Smith, but they made their deadline, and the program, now titled *The Roots of War*, was scheduled on Channel 13 for January 29 at 2 p.m.

### The Case of the Disappearing Documentary

*The Roots of War* had its first public showing at the **Angelika Theater** in Dallas on January 23, 2006 to an invitation-only audience. The response, at least from the buzz in the lobby after the showing, was very positive. Well, not entirely, at least not to one of the invitees.

On Thursday January 26, **Mohamed Elibiary**, the President and CEO of The Freedom and Justice Foundation, a Dallas-based group described on their Website as "...the first state-wide Muslim organization in Texas," sent a letter to the McCuistions and KERA expressing disappointment with the documentary.

The letter asked for three things:

1. "A postponement of the airing ... of *The Roots of War* until these and other inaccurate and libelous defamations are corrected. ...;
2. A disclaimer ... meant to clear up any unintended defamation of the American Muslim community. ...;
3. A Citizen Town Hall type of meeting to air right after the airing of this documentary to provide the audience with a chance to hear divergent analysis of the subject matter [other] than that provided in this unbalanced documentary."

The letter also offered the documentary makers help and resources to correct the perceived errors.

After receiving the letter, the McCuistions met by telephone and in person that same afternoon with Elibiary and other members of his group. The result of the meeting was a request by Elibiary for a disclaimer, written by him and appended to the end of the program. "Dennis, wanting to be conciliatory, agreed to do so, without knowing that if you agree to a

disclaimer, you are essentially acknowledging that there is a problem," said Niki. "Dennis also suggested that the program would receive additional editing to update it before it ran nationally on the network."

The McCuistions were now in a bind. Two days from air, they had tentatively agreed to a disclaimer, which would raise questions about the program's veracity. They also had opened the door for KERA to say, "If you're planning more edits anyway, why not just wait?" and the station acted on that opening.

In a later follow-up letter to supporters, Dennis wrote, "They [KERA] indicated they had no time to do the disclaimer properly and that due to the length of the video, any disclaimer would impinge on other programming." He also said that he had received another call from the station and was told that Elibiary "...had said the disclaimer was mandatory." On Friday, the 27th, at about 3 p.m., KERA gave in to the Islamic group's demands, and *The Roots of War* was uprooted from the Channel 13 lineup. In less than forty-eight hours, two years of work had been undermined.

It was three more years before *The Roots of War*, gained an audience. The grant funding had been spent, so Niki dug into her own pocket and went back to work. "In the following two years, I went to the Middle East four times on my own dime and conducted interviews to bring things current. Phil and I took our own personal funds to complete

new footage, graphics and interviews. It had to be re-vetted, etc., by key experts. It was almost a completely new piece. In June 2009, KERA broadcast the results.

A bit grudgingly, perhaps, Niki admits that the new documentary is better for the extra effort. "It's much more realistic, much fairer, much more objective, and much more truthful. It is a much better film."

But sometimes, the more things change, the more they stay the same, and the film's chief critic, Mohamed Elibiary, was no happier with the results the second time around. Invited to a party held to celebrate the film's second birth, Elibiary got into a noisy altercation with Dennis

McCuistion and left in a huff.

2010 marks the twentieth season of *The McCuistion Program*, and various special events are planned for the year, including periodic retrospectives featuring programs from the archives. Check the TV schedule at KERA's Website, and make your own decisions about "things that matter" and "people who care." 