

## Fun-filled memories for broadcasters

**In 1987, the TV news programme Top Half was co-fronted by Natalie Brunt. Wintec journalism student Florence Kerr catches up with her and another veteran Waikato broadcaster, Ronny Phillips.**

In 1987, Waikato's Natalie Brunt was described as the worst-dressed woman in New Zealand by Kiwi gossip columnist David Hartnell.

"He said my dress sense made him want to spew," says the former Hamilton-based television presenter, now living in Hollywood.

"I sent him a packet of Quickeze and said, 'I hope you feel better soon'."

Twenty years ago Brunt, who is now Natalie Chetkovich, was a household name in New Zealand, co-hosting the 30-minute regional news programme Top Half with experienced television anchorman John Hawkesby.

The Hamilton-born woman, who also represented Waikato for three years at netball, began her broadcasting career on the children's programme Viewfinder and also did on-air work on Radio Waikato and 91FM in Hamilton.

But her big break came when she was invited to audition for Top Half, which at that time screened six days a week.

"I remember doing my audition with John and I could feel the on-air chemistry. After the audition, he came up and said I had the job. I was ecstatic."

She was just 23.

Chetkovich says she still has good memories of her time on New Zealand television, which also included a period fronting Crimewatch with veteran broadcaster Ian Johnstone.

But she says it was a tough time for broadcasters, with limited facilities.

"Back then we used to have to fight the Fair Go team for the teleprompter because there was only one in the station. Ian and I would have to learn our lines just before we went to air. Remember this was a monthly slot, so imagine having to memorise a month's worth of crime. It was quite an experience."

These days Chetkovich lives in Los Angeles with her husband of 20 years, Nick, a musician, and their two children. She works as a film editor with some of the big-name stars including Tom Cruise, Richard Gere and Ben Affleck.

But she still has fond memories of her broadcasting career in New Zealand.

"I wouldn't have missed it for the world."

She says she also misses New Zealand and hasn't



PICTURE: Times files

**WORST DRESSED: Natalie Chetkovich (Natalie Brunt as Crimewatch viewers may remember her) has fond memories of her television days in New Zealand.**



PICTURE: Times files

**RADIO FUN: Veteran Waikato broadcaster Ronny Phillips with two guests says radio today is less fun than in the late 1980s.**

He says the show was often broadcast at night from Freeman's Bar in Hamilton and every hour the waitresses did dance routines on top of the bar.

"Many mornings we had a studio full of people for champagne breakfast."

There were also pranks - but quite mild by today's standards.

ruled out a return. "When we retire I would love to come back."

Ronny Phillips, a long-time Hamilton radio presenter, also has some fond memories of broadcasting in 1980s. "Back then we were playing vinyl records, and commercials were on tape.

"We had turntables and cart machines, and basically had a bit of a choice what songs we played.

"Today, all we have is a computer screen and a keyboard.

"Fun was the way of life in the industry back then, before accountants took over and started asking the question, 'Who's going to pay for it?'"

Phillips, who now works for radio station The Breeze, says people often talk to him about the antics of DJs in the 1980s when he worked for Kiwi FM.

"Many things we did then are fairly tame by today's standards, but they were different on radio back then. We did bungee jumps 'live' on-air, radio shows with guests from the top of Te Aroha Mountain, with a full champagne breakfast including a butler in tails and white gloves.

Other shows were done on the boning floor at the Horotiu Meatworks "with all the boning men in white outfits and gumboots singing and tapping along with their boning knives" - and in thoroughbred sire Sir Tristram's stable.

"I remember one couple (who) had a beautiful landscaped section which the wife was proud of. The husband wanted me to call his wife to say the neighbour had me (a contractor) coming in to dig up part of the section to gain access to the their section.

"I explained to the wife how much work I needed to do. Well, you should have heard that lady. The air was quite blue! Boy! Did she go off!"

Phillips says many listeners called in regularly and some became infamous because of their personalities.

He says the callers provided an insight into what was happening "and how people are thinking in our communities".

He says radio has changed from the community-driven stations back in the 80s.

"It's clinical now, more about making a profit, getting more out employees; the fun part is gone; it's about business and who has the biggest share."

He says the memories of the 1980s will be with him forever. "We had lots of great times on air with many different people from all sorts of backgrounds. Today, I still have people telling me about things they remember they did with us on air at Kiwi FM."