



By Marie Bouvier



# Beverly Kirk:

## Big-Time Reporter, Small-Town Roots

When you speak to Beverly Kirk, she is everything you would expect a national newscaster to be: polished, professional, intelligent and beautiful. It comes as a surprise to many of her viewers that she comes from Burkesville, a one-stoplight town in Cumberland County, Kentucky. But it is Kirk's small-town values that have informed every element of her life as a successful newscaster for NBC News Channel, NPR, and PBS. Her new venture as one of the lead anchors for "*PBS/NPR Newsbrief*" is yet another stepping stone on her path from small town to big time.

### Small-Town Roots

Beverly Kirk grew up in the American ideal of a small town. Ask what she remembers of Burkesville, and it sounds like a Norman Rockwell painting. Men whittling

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Beverly Kirk, one of the lead anchors for "*PBS/NPR Newsbrief*," sits in the broadcast studio before going on the air.



Beverly Kirk and Jonathan Blakley, editor in NPR's Newscast Unit, review news copy before the evening's broadcast.

Photo © Jon Goell 2004

on the courthouse square. Neighbors leaving preserves on your porch. Knowing everyone in town by name.

It wasn't until she left Burkesville that she realized how rare a lifestyle she had. "It's hard for people who have grown up in an urban area to wrap their minds around. That life still exists." She honors the work ethic and solid values she learned from her parents, teachers, and mentors during her early years and continues to carry them with her.

### Achieving the Dream

Beverly Kirk is one of those rare people who knew what she wanted to be from the time she was young. She watched the news with her parents every evening, the broadcasts of then-news anchor Oprah Winfrey on the CBS station from Nashville, Tenn.

"I remember as a little girl thinking, 'She's the only one who looks like me. I can do that,'" Kirk says. "Thank goodness no one ever told me I couldn't." From that moment on, her career path was set.

Kirk's parents, Malcolm and Edna Lue Kirk, encouraged her to dream big. They were a working class family, her father a truck driver and her mother a teacher's aide. But Kirk says her parents foresaw different opportunities for their four children. "They said, 'We don't want you to have to work as hard as we did. So whatever we can help you do to get an education, we're all for it.' And I thought, 'Wow. I can't disappoint them.'" She didn't. Kirk graduated as the valedictorian at Cumberland County High School.

### Incredible Mentors

The librarian at Cumberland County High School, 1973 UK grad Lucille Garner, was Kirk's first mentor. When Kirk considered going into weather forecasting, Garner told her that she wrote well and should give journalism a try. Kirk agreed and pursued a broadcast journalism major at Western Kentucky University as an Alumni Leadership Scholar.

Kirk worked for a short time with the Sun Belt Conference, thinking that her interest in sports might be one of her broadcasting options, but later she shifted paths again and decided to go into news reporting after being encouraged by another mentor, Kern Alexander, then the president of Western Kentucky University.

Kirk's first on-air job was with WBKO in Bowling Green as early morning television anchor. After three years there, she was hired in Lexington as weekend anchor and city government reporter with WLEX-TV.

## The Art of Diplomacy

In Lexington, Kirk began to consider a broader view of her career path. The University of Kentucky's Patterson School of Diplomacy and International Commerce offered her a unique opportunity to earn a master's degree in 1996 that would prepare her for both political coverage on television and a possible alternate career in diplomacy. She cut her hours at WLEX to pursue the degree. But when a news director promoted Kirk, she found herself working and attending school, both full-time.

While pursuing her studies, Kirk found another mentor who would significantly impact her life. The late Vince Davis, then director of the Patterson School, knew firsthand the critical importance of networking. Davis made it a point to introduce students to his own business contacts, offering them a leg up in their nascent careers. "The most valuable lesson I took away from UK was the ability to network," Kirk says. When she moved to Washington, D.C., to work with NBC in 1997, it was Davis who introduced her to his friends and colleagues there, helping her find success in a political environment.

## Hard News

Kirk's job as a reporter for NBC was very different from being a local anchor. "One of the first rules of working there was that you kept a suitcase packed with essentials under your desk. If there were breaking news, you could get up from your desk, get your bag, and go directly to the airport," says Kirk. During her time at NBC, she used the suitcase often, covering the 2000 Summer Olympics in Australia, President Bill Clinton's impeachment trial, and the Pope's visit to Mexico City in 1999. But the most memorable event was September 11.

Her original plan for the day was to cover Michael Jordan on his return to the NBA as a player for the Washington Wizards. Kirk was dressed for a news conference in a pantsuit and high heels.

While driving to work, she heard the breaking news on the radio: a plane had hit the World Trade Center. By the time she reached the office, the second plane had hit. She ran down the street to the Capitol to interview lawmakers. As soon as she arrived, her pager went off. One of the planes involved in the tragedy had flown out of Boston, and NBC was sending her there. She ran back toward the office to pick up her bag and go to the airport.

"I'm running across the east front of the Capitol as fast as I can. Of course, I'm not dressed for this. I happened to stop, and I noticed smoke on the horizon," says Kirk. "About that time, my beeper went off again and said, 'A plane has hit the Pentagon.

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You need to go to the Pentagon.’ It took three hours to get out of the city. Then I did live shots for all of NBC’s affiliates, the afternoon and early evening. I’ll never forget standing there, watching the firefighters and the building burning.”

It wasn’t until she spoke to her mother that she realized the enormity of the situation. “I called home and my mother was in tears. She said, ‘Are you okay?’ I said, ‘I’m fine. I’m working. But when you see me on TV, you’ll see the building behind me.’ I wanted to prepare her for it. That was when I got scared.”

That was what Kirk refers to as a “heart-stopping crisis moment.” After 15 years in television, she had to question whether she had made the right career choice. She made a deliberate decision to take time off from the breakneck pace of national reporting to make informed choices about her life.

During those few weeks, she slept late for the first time in her life. She did freelance work; she worked with the U.S. Department of State on a foreign service officer promotion panel; and she thought about what she wanted to do. But deep down, she longed to return to news. She wanted a job in television, but one with a more stable lifestyle than national reporting. Then she heard about the opportunity with NPR and PBS.

### A Bold New Venture

PBS had thought for years of having up-to-the-minute newscasts, and NPR’s news unit seemed to be a perfect partner, with its award-winning news team. Together, the networks created a format of 30-second newsbriefs at the top of each hour from 8 p.m. until 1 a.m. They needed newscasters with experience, credibility, and enthusiasm. It seemed to be an ideal fit for Kirk.

Kirk became one of two on-air anchors for “*PBS/NPR Newsbrief*.” Just one month after being hired, the show went on the air in late December 2003 with a pilot group of stations. Three months later, it was airing on 72 stations nationwide. (The program does not yet air on Kentucky Educational Television.) Kirk is excited to be part of this innovative news venture with two widely-respected networks. It also offers her a much-needed opportunity to return to a more structured lifestyle. “I have weekends off,” Kirk says, with a note of wonder in her voice.



Kirk was emcee for the Lyman T. Johnson banquet at Marriott’s Griffin Gate Resort and Golf Club in 1995 when she was a morning anchor for WLEX-TV in Lexington. The theme of the banquet that year was “Building Toward the Future,” and the accomplishments of graduates from the 1980s were celebrated.

### Broadcasting Small-Town Values Nationwide

With a national audience, Kirk says people sometimes have a hard time reconciling what they see with her rural background. “Some people say I grew up with two strikes against me, being a black woman from the hills. I think those two things are assets that have made me the person that I am.”

Her small-town values and supportive family have given her a strong foundation on which to build; she still believes she can accomplish anything she sets her mind to do. When others have a hard time understanding her inspiration, she just tells them, “You ought to come home with me some time to Kentucky.”

That southern hospitality is a perfect reflection of how she became such a success; her warmth, intelligence and kindness make her a trustworthy and welcome newscaster for our nation.

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