

Prime time unties U.S. purse strings

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BENBOW ON TELEVISION

opinion

Alice in television wonderland would say: "It gets curiouser and curiouser."

Almost nothing about "What Will We Say to a Hungry World" is what we'd expect from prime time TV programming. And yet it is a success according to the man who made it.

First of all curiosities, WLCY-Channel 10 has devoted five hours of prime time tonight, 6:30 p.m. to 11:30 p.m. — even setting back the Eyewitness News a half-hour — to make room for "What Will We Say to a Hungry World." Not exactly a dynamic topic, that. I mean, it sounds like a downer if the networks are correct that we viewers will watch only America's favorite funny man backed by a chorus line of Los Angeles' finest blue knights.

The special program was created by Jerry McClun as executive producer at The Russ Reid Company, Pasadena, Calif., for World Vision International. The St. Petersburg Times had to call him at his office for details because WLCY-Channel 10 knew little about how the show was to be run.

MONDAY, WLCY received two huge crates weighing about 3,000 pounds and containing the studio sets for the program. Yet most of the show — about four of the five hours — is on film and tape. Why the local origination? Why does WLCY supply a local director and camera crew for a pre-packaged program?

World Vision International sends in its own producer, Hal Penrose, and its own host, Rev. James Andrews, pastor of Buffalo (N.Y.) Metropolitan Chapel. Rev. Andrews will

conduct interviews with persons from the Tampa-St. Petersburg area who are familiar with the work of World Vision International while the bulk of the program is handled, on tape, by Dr. Stanley Mooneyham, president of the organization.

It is a money-raising ploy, a sort-of modified telethon, a curious example of how, in America, money makes more money, ingenuity overcomes apparent risks and the populace is willing to share generously when it is convinced the cause is worthy.

World Vision International is a 25-year-old, "private, non-profit Christian humanitarian organization," according to press releases. Set up originally to cope with problems in Korea, it now serves more than 30 nations, 66,000 children, 35 projects, out of 15 offices around the world. The main offices are in Monrovia, Calif.

BUT THE PROGRAM TONIGHT will tell you all that. In fact, McClun admits the show has no entertainment per se. The celebrity guests such as Dennis Weaver, Ralph Waite, Art Linkletter, Don Sutton, Nancy Reagan and "Dear Abby" van Buren appear to express their commitment to the work of World Vision International.

Interspersed with local interviews and filmed reports on emergency relief and long-range self-help projects will be commentaries from experts like Sen. Mark O. Hatfield (na-



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tional chairman), Sen. George McGovern, Dr. Paul Ehrlich (the population control advocate), Dr. Jean Mayer (nutritionist), Dr. Georg Borgstrom (food scientist) and Dr. D. Gale Johnson (University of Chicago agriculturist).

ANYWAY, getting back to the curious aspects of TV and this example. You can imagine that this program and the air time purchased from local stations around the country would cost thousand of clams. It does, but it also pays off.

McClun says the program was launched last June in several test cities. In St. Louis, for example, it outdrew — in audience and in pledged contributions — the Jerry Lewis

telethon by nearly two-to-one, he said. The Jerry Lewis appeal took in \$290,000 and World Vision took in \$425,000 in St. Louis.

WITH THIS ENCOURAGEMENT, the intensity of exposure was increased and certain money-saving modifications were made. From about six telecasts in six cities last summer, the number has increased to 13 in December and a commitment for 18 this month. Tonight's will be the 34th telecast. There are now seven studio sets being shipped around the country in order to allow setup time while the personnel — Penrose and host Andrews — appear somewhere practically every night.

The set at WLCY was shipped from Richmond, Va., but others were used Monday in Wilmington, N.C., and Tuesday in Augusta, S.C.

McClun said he originally saturated each TV market area with advance publicity but has since found most of it was unnecessary. At first, telephone switchboards were set up in local studios to receive pledges but it was found to be less costly to use a direct toll-free phone line to California — the system to be used tonight.

How much does it cost? In view of the recent NBC News documentary on "The Charity Business," McClun was prepared with a candid answer. In fact, contributors are offered, he said, the latest financial statement prepared by World Vision International's independent accounting firm, Ernst and Ernst.

IT WILL SHOW, he said, that through December 13.8 cents of each dollar is used for administration and fundraising; the rest goes directly to benefit the charitable projects. McClun said that originally the costs had been between 20 and 21 per cent, the ceiling which NBC News found permissible for efficient charity operations. The wider and more frequent use of the packaged program has brought down the relative costs.

Still, I'm naive enough to remain amazed. I'm from a simpler era, I guess, and can't get used to how large this country is, how many millions there are who want to be charitable and how much money must turn over in order to create new money. And television seems to be where it is happening now.