

J. Allison (Al) Binford, Jr. began his pioneering career in public broadcasting at Chicago's WTTW in 1956, and went on to write, produce, direct, and appear in programs that helped to form and develop the present-day Public Broadcasting System. In a career that extended from the 1950s to the 1990s, Al met presidents, dignitaries and celebrities, won numerous awards, and made a difference in the lives of viewers and communities throughout the nation.

Al was born in 1930 in Long Beach, California, where his father was a deep-sea fisherman and on-board bookkeeper for a canning company. When the company went out of business during the Great Depression, the family moved to Aurora, Illinois, to live with grandparents Emma and Orrin Roe Jenks. Mr. Jenks was president of Aurora College from 1911, when he moved the school from Mendota to Aurora, until 1933, when he became president emeritus.

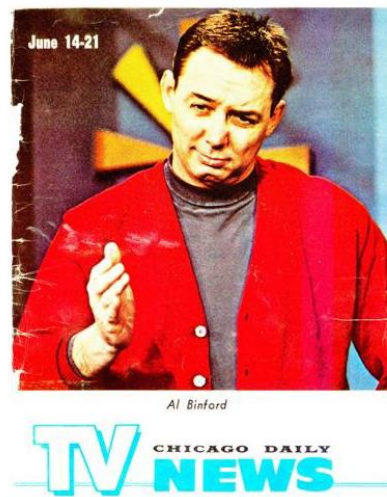
Al Binford, Sr. took over management of the Island Texaco Station in downtown Aurora and later the Hilltop Texaco on Lincoln Avenue. Since it was the Depression, he was grateful for the job, which he kept for thirty-five years.

Al was raised on Calumet Avenue near the college and attended Freeman School and West High School, graduating in 1948. While in high school, he was president of the freshman class, played basketball all four years, was a member of the National Honor Society, and discovered his flair for the English language through teachers Marian Winteringham, Oleda Rislow, and Louise Lane.

Al attended the University of Chicago, graduating with a B.A. in Liberal Arts in 1951. It was the height of the Korean War, and he volunteered for the draft. His tour of duty took him from Camp Gordon, Georgia, to Fort Hood, Texas, where he was an instructor in the Third Armored Division Signal School, and finally to the Kure Signal code center in suburban Hiroshima, Japan, where he served as a cryptographer until the end of the Korean War.

Back in the states, Al continued his studies at the University of Chicago with an emphasis on the American novel and creative writing. He was on the basketball and baseball teams, and president of his fraternity. In the summer before his final exams and writing his master's thesis, Al took a job driving a cab. On his night off, he bumped into a friend who was leaving a job in the mailroom at WTTW and urged Al to apply for the position. He started work the next day, quickly discovered his life's calling, and embarked on a twenty-eight year career in public broadcasting.

After two years of working on the WTTW production crew as floor manager, assistant director and director of non-live programming and IDs, Al moved to WMVS, Channel 10, in Milwaukee as a producer/director and writer. There he produced and directed groundbreaking instructional programs for the Milwaukee Public Schools and the Milwaukee Archdiocese. He was also host of the "Children's Fair" daily program for youngsters. As a result, National Educational Television recruited him to host their "What's New" series, which aired across the country on the NET/PBS network. At that time, "What's New" formed the network's daily children's programming block with "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" and "The Friendly Giant." It was in Milwaukee where Al married Lois Deckow, a teacher, and their daughter Laurel was born.



Al returned to WTTW in 1963 to supervise and produce local children's and public affairs programming, rising to Executive Producer for Public Affairs. A year after returning to Chicago, daughter Erin was born.

At WTTW, Al conceived and produced the teenage talk show, "Our Two Cents Worth," and recruited the host, Lois Brooks. Both he and Lois won Emmys for the program. Al also received the Chicago Area Council Boy Scouts of America Award for Excellence for producing and appearing with Lois on "Den Mothers Workshop" on WTTW and WLS, Channel 7.

During his years at WTTW, Al produced "The Battered Child" for PBS, the first national documentary on child abuse. His other documentaries included: "The Urgent Quest of Stuart Struever" on the Northwestern University archeologist's attempts to preserve the Cahokia Indian Mounds; "Regional Report" on Hugh Hefner's Playboy Empire; and "The New Morality and Contemporary Situational Ethics." Al also wrote, produced, and directed the PBS feature film, "Stand Up for Counting," about two teenage boys, one black and one white, confronted by racial values in America.

Using his background in college sports, Al produced "Essentials of Baseball" with players from the Chicago White Sox and "Essentials of Basketball" with legendary Coach Ray Meyers and the DePaul Blue Demons for the "What's New" series. As he continued to host the series, Al also hosted the local children's program "Totem Club." He produced and hosted adult political programs and was the on-air MC for the annual fundraising auction, thus becoming the most visible on-air person at the station.

With "What's New" airing on every PBS station in America five days a week from 1962 through 1973, Al Binford and Mr. Rogers were the two most visible personalities on national public television. Because of his presence as host and producer for local and national programming, Al was among several dignitaries invited by President Lyndon Johnson to the White House for the signing ceremony of the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967.

In 1971, Al took a four-year hiatus from broadcasting to serve as the Director of Television Production for the State of Illinois Office of Education during the Dan Walker Administration. Because of his work as narrator on films and public service announcements, including the 1974 "Teacher of the Year" film honoring Illinois teachers, Superintendent Joe Cronin dubbed Al Binford "The Voice of Illinois Education."

It wasn't long before Al was lured back to public broadcasting. In 1975, he was recruited to become Vice President for Programming for the statewide Connecticut Public Television network. There he instituted programming that more than doubled the network's membership numbers to 32,000 in less than two years. He created the nightly "Connecticut" public affairs program that covered issues from the local and state level to the U.S. Congress.

During that time, Al programmed hockey, basketball, and local and European soccer to a statewide audience. He supervised the "Connecticut Profiles" series that profiled hockey great Gordie Howe and internationally renowned architect Philip Johnson. He produced two World Hockey Association All Star Games for the PBS network. A pilot program written and produced by Al about Ella Grasso called "Profile of a Governor" ended up serving as her week-long, on-air eulogy after her untimely death.

Al's production department in Connecticut won several Emmys for local programming, and his staff received several awards from The Corporation for Public Broadcasting and PBS for programming and personal accomplishments, including the personal advancement of women in broadcasting. During those years, Al had the pleasure of being a presenter at the Boston Regional Emmys with Julia Child.



In 1982, Al held the position of Director of Public Information for the community of Westport, Connecticut for four years. With a change of regimes, he left to become Director of Public Relations for the Palace Theatre in New Haven.

Al returned to the Midwest in 1987, and once again, to public broadcasting. He signed on as Director of Marketing and Development for WYIN, Channel 56, in Merrillville, Indiana. He raised hundreds of thousands of dollars in just under three years, using Indiana and Purdue University basketball games and PBS-style commercials. He also served for three years as president of the professional group, Communicators of Northwest Indiana, which honored him as the Northwest Indiana Communicator of the Year in 1996.

During his twenty-eight years in public broadcasting, Al nurtured and shared with millions the importance of making a difference with their families, their communities, and society as a whole. Through his work, he always felt he was making the world a better place.

In 1999, Al Binford returned to Aurora and Calumet Avenue. He worked as Associate Editor of *Country Business* magazine for Country Sampler in St. Charles and served as editor of all the other Sampler publications, the *Country Sampler Catalog* and *Decorating Ideas* magazine. Al concluded his career as Development Director for Provena McAuley Manor and Provena Fox Knoll of Provena Senior Services in Aurora. "Unofficially retired," Al always has an eye open for the next big challenge.