In 1947, Walton D. Clarke came to Kent from Springfield, Missouri, where he had worked for three years at KWTO. He was hired to teach "new era" radio courses at Kent State and direct the Radio Workshop, a voluntary organization of students interested in radio broadcasting. The Radio Workshop served as the precursor to the university’s own station. WKSU-AM went on the air with its student staff in 1949. The station applied to become an FM station to increase its broadcast range. And, after the Federal Communications Commission approved the permit, WKSU-FM 88.1 was created as a non-commercial educational station. After months of test pattern trials, WKSU officially took to the airwaves with a student staff and an eclectic mix of programming on Oct. 2, 1950.

In September 1962, WKSU’s frequency changed to 89.7 FM to increase its broadcast range once again. That position on the dial still remains as the frequency for listeners throughout Northeast Ohio. As the on-air staff consisted solely of university students, the station only aired limited hours of radio plays, music, news, and student and faculty interviews. That’s a sharp contrast to today, when WKSU operates 24/7 with a full-time, professional on-air staff. The transition to a professional public radio news station was gradual. For most of the station’s history, even with its student-produced lineup, the station featured classical music. The switch slowly came to life starting in 1974, when WKSU became an NPR affiliate. This change resulted in the addition of many NPR news programs throughout the years, such as Morning Edition, Fresh Air and All Things Considered.

WKSU officially changed its format to news and information in August 2013 to better serve the region and provide quality journalism. "As a public radio station, WKSU is not driven solely by the quest for high ratings," says Andrew Meyer, WKSU news director. Instead, the news team looks to create and share valuable content with the community. "Our goal is to make sure we’re pursuing the stories that are important to our audience, and we want to be engaged and connected with the communities we serve to make sure we are aware of what they need.

Programs like OH Really? help connect the WKSU news team to the community. Through OH Really?, the community becomes part of the journalistic process, submitting and voting on questions online for the reporters to investigate.
The Repository ad promoting WKSU ran in the Repository, the local newspaper of Canton, Ohio.

The technology that today's staff uses is a far cry from that available to the first student staff. The station began its digital chapter in 1994 when WKSU.org was brought to life. Chuck Poulton, the current senior network administrator at WKSU, built the website 26 years ago.

"At that time, we were one of the first dozen or so NPR stations to have a website," Poulton says. "In early 1995, we were the first non-commercial station to use RealAudio technology to stream audio on a website, and we were the second radio station in the world to do so."

WKSU showed its innovative capabilities when it started its first online radio stations in 2005, allowing listeners to tune in on the web and access HD sound, images and video, and with direct input and interaction from the audience. "At that time, we were one of the first NPR stations to have a website," says Wendy Turner, WKSU's general manager and executive director. "WKSU aspires to grow the reporting staff, deepen strategic journalism partnerships and widen our use and expertise with emerging digital tools and platforms."

As WKSU strives to better serve its listening audience and strengthen its relationships with other organizations, it has one partnership it especially seeks to reinforce.

The students at Walt Clarke's Radio Workshop helped shape and mold the station's 70th anniversary. Those events included A Prairie Home Companion at Blossom Music Center.

The virtual event was sponsored by the Kent State Student Alumni Association, whose awards celebrate Ohio's outstanding reporting, superior service journalists.

"Expanding public service is our vision," says Turner. "We have a history of persevering and being innovative here at WKSU and the virtual 70th anniversary celebration looked far different from the events held in 2000 to commemorate the station's 50th anniversary. Those events included guests such as Terry Gross from Fresh Air and Robert Siegel from All Things Considered, and a live presentation of A Prairie Home Companion at Blossom Music Center."

Today's on-air studio looks dramatically different from the first studios in 1950.

The view into a studio production room at the Radio Workshop, from the 1925 Chestnut Barn. Courtesy Kent State University Libraries, Special Collections and Archives.

Fred Newland at the mic during his disc-jockey show in 1950, from the 1925 Chestnut Barn. Courtesy Kent State University Libraries, Special Collections and Archives.