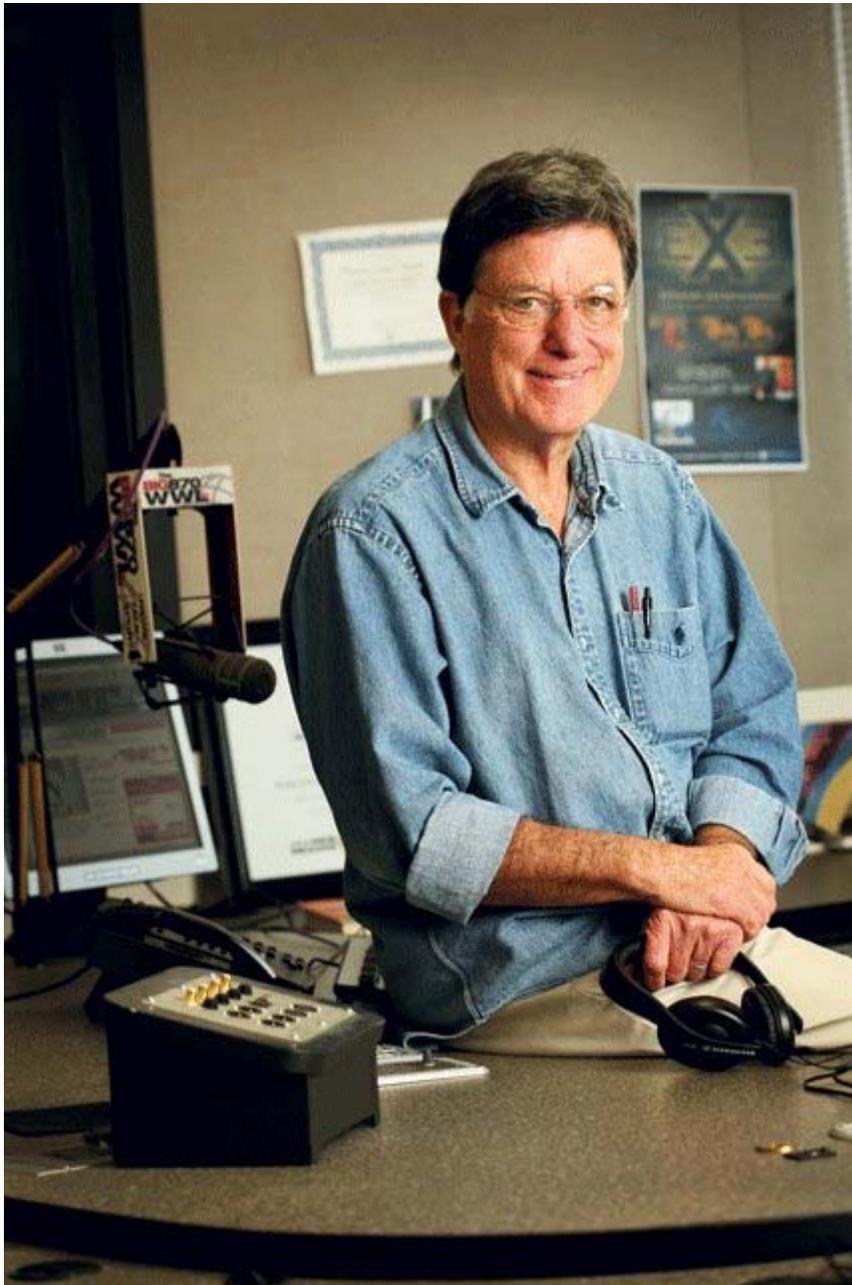


Hoarseness

Garland Robinette's personal recovery

BROBSON LUTZ, M.D.



TERESA CASSAGNE PHOTOGRAPH

It is a voice instantly recognizable from the environs of New Orleans to far reaches of the bayou country. It is the voice of Garland Robinette.

In those first dark weeks post-Hurricane Katrina, displaced Louisianans across the south tuned to WWL radio. The 870 AM frequency became our new banquette – one caller after another asking about missing persons, conditions at home, the status on helicopters with giant sandbags to plug the holes in the levees. The station became an outlet for elected officials to inform and vent.

Of all the WWL talk show hosts who helped with this 24-hour-a-day on-air marathon, the one voice most recognizable and soothing, but also most likely to erupt in anger on yet another bungling of some sort, was the rich, baritone-bass voice of Garland Robinette.

Robinette continues to hold court on WWL radio weekdays on his midday show “Think Tank,” but his voice, while still distinctive and authoritative, is different. At times it becomes gravelly, husky or rasping.

About two years after Katrina, Robinette decided to do something about his snoring. His physician diagnosed a deviated septum, a not uncommon aggravator of snoring. Robinette doesn't remember ever breaking his nose, but he did spend 13 months in Vietnam in the late 1960s jumping in and out of fiberglass boats with all sorts of cuts and scrapes. He was shot twice.

The actual surgery to repair his deviated septum was uneventful. In hospital parlance it was same-day surgery. He arose early on Halloween day 2007, drove to the hospital, underwent surgery, awoke in recovery and was home by

supper.

“I remember waking up coughing. The next day I was very tired and still coughing. I would try to talk and go into a coughing spasm,” Robinette, who is also a portrait artist, recalled recently in an interview that took place in his sun-filled Uptown studio under the gaze of a large portrait in progress of a prominent New Orleanian.

“Attempts to cough would induce coughing and even garbled speech. Gradually over the next week I actually completely lost my voice for a time.”

Robinette saw several local physicians who prescribed various treatments from steroids to decrease any inflammation of the vocal cords to proton pump inhibitors to lessen the effect of acid reflux, an often unrecognized cause of chronic cough. Inspection of his vocal cords using a small fiberoptic scope passed through his nose into his throat didn't show any nodules, polyps or abnormal motion as would be seen with nerve damage.

“After a few months of this, I was becoming more and more depressed. I heard about a voice specialist in New York City who had treated [Luciano] Pavarotti. My wife Nancy flew to New York with me to see him. He passed this monster thing down my throat,” said Robinette.

The instrument that Robinette described was probably a rigid laryngoscope. This is a telescope like device that allows better illumination and magnification of the vocal cords that can detect small areas of abnormalities in the vocal cords easily missed using a direct mirror or the flexible fiberoptic laryngoscope.

“Nancy was in the room and saw everything on a screen as the scope went down my throat. Dr. Blitzer zeroed in on an abnormal red

line on my vocal cords, an area not visible with the smaller scope," said Robinette.

"The doctor had the best news I had heard in months. He said he saw damage but that it was repairable, and the tissues around my vocal cords needed downtime to heal. All I had to do to get better was to stop coughing. How was I going to do that? My New Orleans doctors had given me all sorts of prescriptions for cough medicines, but I kept coughing."

"He told me to take Delsym to suppress my cough. It wasn't even a prescription drug. It was over-the-counter. I got it at a nearby drugstore and took one dose. It was miraculous. My cough stopped. Afterward my wife and I visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I became drowsy, went back to our hotel and fell asleep.

"The next morning I took another dose before we got on an early flight to return to New Orleans. After the plane took off, I felt some sort of electrical sensation rising from my legs to my chest. A stewardess became concerned. She made one of those announcements 'Is there a physician on the flight?' None responded. They were about to turn the flight around when I started feeling better. But I still wasn't coughing.

"Back home, I got the same sensation after I took another dose of the cough suppressant. I was obviously allergic to something in the medicine."

Delsym contains dextromethorphan, a common ingredient in most cough suppressants, in addition to over a dozen other chemicals added for flavor and consistency. But two teaspoonfuls of Delsym contain 60 milligrams of dextromethorphan, making it the longest-lasting over-the-counter cough suppressant with dosing every 12 hours.

A close friend and physician back in New Orleans figured out the component causing the problem after Robinette tried other combinations of cough suppressants until he found a mixture that worked without adverse effects. Robinette keeps a bottle of this new concoction with him at the radio station, in his car and at home.

Robinette says his doctors cannot say what caused his postoperative voice problems. He had asthma as a child and was also diagnosed in the past with a rare condition called Wegener's granulomatosis, that was completely resolved after a trip several years ago to the Mayo Clinic. He is certain that the surgical procedure itself didn't cause the damage, as the surgery to repair a deviated nasal septum takes place way far away from the vocal cords. The vocal cords might have been damaged some way by the breathing tube placed down his throat during the surgery, but Robinette says he will never really know.

"I don't think my voice will ever return to what it was, but at least I can talk and be understood. I think it's still improving. If I see someone who hasn't heard me speak for several months, I'm told it's better. One doctor said he could inject my vocal cords with Botox, but I'm going to have to get really bad to get that done."

Garland Robinette, born in Boutte, was a reporter and news anchor at WWL-TV from 1970 to '90. He left to head public relations at Freeport-McMoRan and later started his own PR firm. Just before Hurricane Katrina, he returned to the airways on WWL radio, and his post-hurricane coverage projected him into the national spotlight. He is also a highly acclaimed portrait artist whose work can be seen at robinettestudios.com.