

# WABASH VALLEY

## PROFILES

*A series of tributes to hometown people and events that have shaped our history.*

### Joseph Benti

**F**resh from New York City with three years in the U.S. Army, 22-year-old Indiana State Teachers College freshman Joseph Benti sauntered into WTHI-TV's new offices on Ohio Street in 1954 to inquire about a job.

Program director Ben Falber Jr. discerned a "gem in the rough." At a time when television was in its infancy and Terre Haute was recognized in broadcast circles as the nation's largest single-station market, the handsome Benti was hired as weekend booth announcer and reporter. The television station was on the air eight hours a day each Saturday and Sunday. Falber's intuition proved sound. In ensuing years, Benti enjoyed an experience-rich career in media, rocketing to national prominence when he succeeded Mike Wallace as the sole anchorman on the *CBS Morning News* in the fall of 1966. Viewer response prompted the network to expand the daily show from 25 minutes to one hour on March 31, 1969.



Upon graduating from Indiana State in 1958, with a major in speech and dramatic arts, Benti joined the *Terre Haute Star* staff. A framed copy of his first front-page byline — the report of presidential candidate John F. Kennedy's visit to Terre Haute in 1959 — warrants a prominent niche among his keepsakes. In 1960 he was a journalism instructor at the University of Iowa while working toward a master's degree. That was followed by television jobs in Kansas City and Los Angeles before he assumed the CBS post. For four years Benti was on the cutting edge of historic world events, including the 1968 assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. In 1969 his college alma mater honored him as a Distinguished Alumnus.

Benti left CBS effective Aug. 28, 1970 and moved to Denmark for a year with his wife, the former Rosalie Ammerman of Dana, and their three children, Wynne (born in Clinton), Breann (born in Terre Haute) and Edmund (born in Iowa City). "I was burned out," he explained. Eventually he returned to Los Angeles to work seven more years for CBS before opting to become a freelance writer. In 1984 Benti co-founded Four Point Entertainment, a production company, but severed ties with the firm in 1990.

Soon to be 67 years old, retired and living in Studio City, Calif., with his second wife Patty Ecker and their children Matthew and Diann (twins born in 1982), Benti refers to his vocational status as "extinct and loving it." Although he is quick to give credit to Terre Haute, the community where he matured intellectually and learned most of his career skills, he admits he seldom ventures back to Indiana. He maintains regular contact with Falber and his wife, entertainer Nancee South. The trio have been friends since sharing celebrity status on *The Jerry Van Dyke Show*, a live 45-minute daily variety presentation. Benti was co-producer and Van Dyke's straight man. He also communicates often with former WTHI announcer Lary Lewman, one of the nation's foremost voiceover specialists, now residing in Maryland.

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