

GM Blangiardi Coaches Surging Squad to Victory

Former gridiron guru motivates Hawaii News Now crew in Honolulu

Rick Blangiardi's Boston accent, not to mention his passion for that historic city, becomes more pronounced when discussing growing up in a "three-decker" house in working-class Cambridge, and watching baseball legend Ted Williams play at Fenway Park.

And while Hawaii is almost literally a world away, the KGMB-KHNL Honolulu VP/general manager is every bit as fond of the Aloha State as he is of the Bay State.

"It was so different than anything I'd ever seen," Blangiardi says of his arrival in 1965. "Palm trees, the pristine water—we used to swim in the dirty and cold Atlantic. I've never stopped appreciating its beauty and its people."

They appreciate him, too. A former college football player and coach, a raconteur and one of the more outsize personalities in town, Blangiardi wields considerable influence in the state. He oversees Hawaii News Now—Raycom's virtual triopoly that's taken over the market lead in Honolulu—and is poised to hold onto the trophy long-term. While the newsgathering and promotional might of three stations (Raycom has a shared services deal with KFVE) is a huge advantage, Blangiardi's colleagues credit him for getting every last bit of effort out of his crew.

"He's probably the best boss I ever had in 30 or more years in the media," says Mark Platte, Blangiardi's news director. "I've had 100-plus meetings with him in my three years here, and I've learned something in every one."

Blangiardi speaks fondly of his old Italian "tenements and factories" neighborhood, when a dollar from Mom covered a subway ride to the Red Sox game, a bleachers seat and a hot dog and Coke. "We were the first generation to become Americans," he says. "They gave us American names and sent us to Irish-Catholic schools."

Blangiardi had hoped to attend the Naval Academy to make his father, a Navy veteran, proud. His football skills were Annapolis material, but his academic marks were not. After Rick signed a letter of intent to play at Boston College, his father, a munitions expert, was offered a transfer to Pearl Harbor. His mother's one demand: Rick come with them.

"My only connection to Hawaii was Ricky Nelson's 'Traveling Man,'" Blangiardi jokes, warbling the '61 ditty's verse about a "pretty Polynesian baby over the sea." "In my neighborhood, people barely went to Florida. Nobody talked about Hawaii."

Playing linebacker at the University of Hawaii, Blangiardi fell hard for the place. After finishing his studies in Massachusetts when his mother came back east, he then returned to Hawaii for his master's and a coaching position.

Blangiardi served as Hawaii's defensive coordinator and associate head coach but, with a child on the way, the \$15,000 annual salary wasn't cutting it. A colleague in local television told him his work ethic could pay off in that field, so Blangiardi jumped to KGMB as an account executive in 1977, working his way up to general sales manager in 1984.

Blangiardi's first general manager job was at KHNL in 1984, before taking on top spots at

force crafted in Blangiardi's image ("He could sell ice to the Eskimos," says Platte), pushed Hawaii News Now—featuring a newsroom of 65 cranking out 40½ hours of news a week—to the top of the Honolulu heap.

DMA No. 71 is unique: It's an island and a statewide television market. Hawaii's remote locale creates an extraordinary connection between residents and local news outfits, which Blangiardi understands and appreciates after decades in the region. "There's an old-fashioned feeling as broadcasters that what we do still matters," he says. "That is an inspiration each and every day."

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KING Seattle and KPIX San Francisco.

His charges describe him as a gifted communicator and motivator—skills Blangiardi honed on the football sidelines. "Rick is a very good coach and mentor," says Wayne Daugherty, Raycom executive VP and COO. "He inspires people and challenges them. They know he's on their side, and they'd run through walls for him."

Blangiardi took on a somewhat unlikely role in 1999 when he became president of the Tel-emundo station group. He spoke no Spanish, but knew TV operations and could relate to people from different cultures. "They perceived that I was a culturally fluent guy, based on the years I lived in Hawaii," he says.

After three years in that role in Los Angeles, Blangiardi came back to Honolulu, running various stations, including KGMB, and taking over the combined operation in 2009. The local media watchdogs, not to mention the competition, weren't fond of the setup (some refer to it as "The Cartel"), but it passed muster with the regulators, and the game was on.

Fox affiliate KHON dominated the Honolulu market for decades. But the imposing resources of KGMB-KHNL and KFVE, along with a sales

experience when he took over the TV newsroom, credits Blangiardi for taking a chance on him—and for selling the unorthodox move to Raycom brass. Blangiardi isn't much of a tech guy, notes Platte, but nonetheless has Hawaii News Now dominating on all platforms, including Facebook (almost 103,000 fans, to KHON's 29,000) and Twitter (44,000 followers).

The 66-year-old Blangiardi recently signed on for three more years. The father of three grown children, he doesn't play golf and puts all of his energies into broadcasting and a long list of community organizations (among many others, he is president of Aloha Council Boy Scouts and is a director for the Hawaii Food Bank).

"He knows everybody in town, and they all seek his advice," says Platte. "Rick loves this place, and this place loves him." ❏



Rick Blangiardi

Title:
VP/general manager, KGMB-KHNL Honolulu

Education:
U. of Hawaii, 1965-1966; B.S., Springfield College, 1969; MEd, U. Hawaii, 1973

Employment Highlights:
Assistant coach, associate head coach, U. of Hawaii football, 1972-77

Account executive, local sales manager, general sales manager, KGMB, 1977-84
VP/GM, KHNL, 1984-89

VP/GM, KING Seattle, 1989-92
VP, CBS Television Network, 1992-93

VP/GM, KPIX San Francisco, 1993-94

Group president, River City Broadcasting, 1994-96

President, Tel-emundo station group, 1999-2002

Senior VP/GM, KHON-KGMB, 2002-05

Senior VP/GM, KHON Honolulu, 2005-06

President/GM, KGMB, 2006-09

Current title since 2009

Personal:
Born Sept. 15, 1946; sons Matthew, 35, and Ryan, 32; daughter Laura, 27