

Moral Victory

Listeners to Radio's 'Dr. Laura' Get Religion . . . and Lots of Advice

By JOHN DART
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WOODLAND HILLS—You have to wonder why up to 60,000 callers try each day to place their moral dilemmas before "Dr. Laura," as the sharp-witted Laura Schlessinger is known on her No. 2-ranked nationally syndicated radio talk show.

Often sounding like a no-nonsense nun skewering the lame excuses of an errant pupil in front of the whole class, Schlessinger witts some of the half-dozen callers daily with blunt cross-examinations and doses of religious morality.

To refer to religious values and moral codes on an ostensibly nonreligious program aired by secular

stations carries some risks, she acknowledges, and has given her some grief on a couple of thorny issues.

And yet, her morality-based scoldings appear to be one reason that, in only three years, she has expanded her base on KFI-AM (640) in Los Angeles to millions of listeners on 400 stations.

She has passed the celebrated Howard Stern and is fast approaching No. 1-ranked Rush Limbaugh, according to Michael Harrison, publisher-editor of Talkers magazine, the talk show trade journal. His publication estimates that Limbaugh has 19 million to 21 million listeners weekly. Schlessinger has 14 million to 16 million and Howard Stern has 11 million.

Please see RADIO, B1



FRANK WIRSE / Los Angeles Times

At KFI studios, Laura Schlessinger answers a call to her program.

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LOS ANGELES TIMES

VALLEY NEWS

RADIO: Blending God, Psychology

Continued from B1

to 12 million. For most of her 25 years off and on Southern California radio, Schlessinger said, "If a caller got into religion, I'd say, 'Let's leave that; that's not the venue here.'"

Five years ago, however, Schlessinger started taking seriously her part-Jewish background, leading to her formal conversion at a Woodland Hills synagogue one year ago.

A newfound popularity in religious circles brings her speaking invitations at synagogues plus repeat appearances at the Los Angeles Catholic Archdiocese's huge annual Religious Education Congress and at the Rev. Robert Schuller's Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove where she spoke last Sunday.

"In some cases, her insights are more penetrating than what one hears from church leaders," the liberal Protestant magazine Christian Century asserted recently. For listeners tired of hearing complainers shifting the blame, the magazine said, "Dr. Laura's insistence on responsible behavior is sweet vengeance and novel entertainment."

Indeed, on a recent program, a male caller who said his girlfriend's divorce had just become final, told Schlessinger that he suddenly realized he "wasn't ready for a family" after spending months of "caring for her and her boys."

He said he and his girlfriend were going to tell the youngsters that night that he was leaving.

"I was living my life for her instead of for myself," said John, the caller.

"Excuse me, I thought you were taking that on as your life," said Schlessinger, who let seconds of silence tick away (normally dreaded "dead air" on radio) while the caller squirmed.

"I became resentful of it because I had to do it instead of because I wanted to," he said.

"I don't always want to obey traffic laws, but we spend most of our lives containing 'what we want to do' because 'what we have to do' elevates us," she said.

"Right." (pause)
"Do me a favor. Don't ever date a woman with kids again . . . And what are you going to tell the kids? That 'you drain me'? 'Your love was not enough'? I suggest that you just don't go back. You telling them anything will just devastate them."

"I know that," said John. (long pause)

"First of all, John, I don't believe this is the problem. Do you want to tell me the truth?"

"There were a lot of overlying things."

"John? You haven't told the truth yet."

"We weren't a match."

"I understand that. [pause] Just tell me, what was the problem with her?"

"I want to say that a lot of the problem is that she hasn't let go of her ex-husband yet, and he still

controls and manipulates her life, and I can't deal with that."

"So, you didn't have all the power. [pause] Wow, that was fascinating! Took us a while to get to that. OK, John, seems to me you moved in to be 'The Man. And you're going to abandon her instead of understanding that there is a transition time and of realizing that there is still a place for their dad. . . ."

"You guys are very territorial like that. There is still the scent of his pee on your turf and you're going to abandon them all . . . Maybe you can't stand not being God. Keep out of their lives a bit and have some counseling."

Schlessinger sometimes surprises callers with her analyses and advice.

One caller said most family members were against inviting to a baby's baptism a sexually active

he said.

Schlessinger said she kept her listeners abreast of her progress toward the ceremony in April 1996, which was simultaneous with her son's. Her lapsed-Protestant husband expects to complete his conversion process by the end of the year.

"I get a ton of mail from priests, ministers and pastors who say 'thank you, thank you' after I explain how important it is that a family have a monolith of beliefs, rituals and practice," she said.

Typical Christian praise comes from listeners such as the Rev. Ned C. Elsas of Buchanan, Mich., who faxed a letter this week saying he was "absolutely thrilled [over] a licensed psychotherapist who dares, publicly, to make a stand on moral and ethical issues thoroughly grounded in the Judeo-Christian heritage."

But she is criticized by some Christians for saying that gays and lesbians should not be castigated for wanting intimate companionship. "I am not following Jewish law here, but my conscience does not allow me to say somebody should be alone," she said.

On the other hand, Schlessinger risks criticism from the gay community by saying that the sacrament of marriage can be only between a man and a woman, and that same-sex couples should never adopt babies—only hard-to-place older children, if any.

"So, I'm always making somebody unhappy," she said.

Her advice to mothers to stay home for their child's first years reaps Schlessinger additional knocks.

"Her opinions are not based on psychological research," said psychologist Ori Peter of Mount St. Mary's College in Los Angeles. "Many mothers are not skilled at mothering, and it might be better to put the child part of the time in a quality day-care center."

The winds of criticism notwithstanding, Schlessinger is sailing along.

Her two books have been best-sellers and a third will come out in the fall. She has monthly magazine and syndicated newspaper columns.

KFI, which has broadcast her program from noon to 2 p.m. Monday through Friday, will run all three hours of her live show starting Monday. Her program is next headed for stations in South Africa and England.

Meanwhile, back in the Schlessinger office at KFI, son Deryk is occupied at a desk computer while listening to his mother applying a verbal slap to a caller trying to justify his moral missteps.

The caller can't believe he heard Schlessinger's sharp retort correctly: "Pardon?"

Dr. Laura: "I wish I could give a pardon . . . I think your role-modeling stinks!"

Deryk (unheard on the air): "Ooooh, major bombing! Major bombing. Go, Mommy! Go, Mommy!"

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Laura Schlessinger

grandmother who would undoubtedly bring "her temporary stud" to the ceremony.

Schlessinger took issue: "Sometimes through these very significant, life's steppingstone moments, people get revelations. We don't want to disconnect grandma from the off chance that grandma gets her act together experiencing this holy event."

Schlessinger, now 50, had a Jewish father and an Italian mother in a Brooklyn household that was nonreligious and proud of intellectual achievement. Dreaming of teaching science at the university level, she earned a doctorate in physiology at Columbia University—the "doctor" in "Dr. Laura."

While teaching biology at USC, she switched career goals by becoming certified in marriage, family and child counseling.

A chance call to a Los Angeles talk radio program hosted by veteran broadcaster Bill Ballance led to guest appearances, then a series of shows of her own. When she and her husband, Lew Bishop, an ex-USC professor who now manages her career, had their son, Deryk, 11 years ago, she quit radio work for nearly four years.

Her interest in Judaism was sparked in 1992 by a television documentary on the Holocaust. "I started reading up a storm," she said.

When she inquired about membership in 1995 at Temple Aliyah, a Conservative synagogue in Woodland Hills, Rabbi Stewart Vogel told her that, by tradition, Jewish identity is passed along through one's mother. Thus, she would have to take a course at the University of Judaism and go through Jewish conversion rites,