Remember why you do what you do? Hint: It’s not the money.

One day, when I was 6 years old, I marched into the living room, looked my parents in the eye and made a bold pronouncement.

"I’m going to be on the radio."

None of us knew what possessed me to say it. But there’s no question that from that moment on, I was possessed about making it happen.

The thing is, I thought I wanted to be a disc jockey. I saved up my allowance to buy 45s. Using a record player I had gotten for Christmas and pretending that an old railroad spike my father had found was a microphone, I practiced. I picked up the afternoon paper on my way home from school and read the stories aloud in my room, doing newscasts on my make-believe radio show because that’s what my favorite station did.

Then, when I was 15, career day at my high school featured one of the most popular disc jockeys in Springfield, MO, my hometown. After his presentation, I gathered all the courage I could muster and struck up a conversation.

"I want to be a deejay," I told him.

"No you don’t," he replied. "How many 80-year-old deejays can you name?"

I had to admit I couldn’t think of any.

"There are no 80-year-old deejays," he explained. "You’re washed up long before you get that old. What you want to be is a newsman. Then when you’re 80, everyone will think you’re a statesman."

A statesman! Statesmen can make a difference!

I had been growing up in the ’60s and ’70s, after all, an era when Walter Cronkite defined electronic journalism. I had watched his coverage of assassinations, riots, men on the moon and Watergate. He was so trusted that many believed we lost the Vietnam War the moment he said that he no longer thought it was winnable. He certainly had made a difference.

The deejay advised me to get into journalism right away, on the school paper and the school radio station. I did get on the school paper, but we didn’t have a radio station. So a friend and I started one. He spun the records; I took a tape recorder to student council meetings to cover the “news.” I got my first professional radio news job while I was in college, still in Springfield. Three years later, I became a news director at the age of 23.

Shortly after that, on April 29, 1983, a tornado hit Springfield. As the storm approached, plowed through the city and then moved on, my staff and I provided wall-to-wall coverage. Some of us actually chased the storm. We worked through the night reporting on the damage and casualties. Hundreds of homes and businesses were damaged or destroyed, but amazingly, only two people died.

Calls started coming in the next day. A few days after that, there were letters. Dozens of people thanked us for our reporting and for braving the storm so that they knew to take shelter. But one of the letters stood out. I swear this is true: The ink was smudged, the writer said, because she had literally been moved to tears.

She wrote that when the power suddenly went out at her house, she turned on the radio. She heard us urge everyone to take shelter, so she and her family ran to the basement. Seconds later they heard what sounded like a freight train. When the noise subsided they walked upstairs, only to discover that the ceiling above their living room, where they had just been watching television, had collapsed. The furniture where they’d been sitting had been crushed by debris.

“You saved our lives," she wrote.

“You saved our lives.

That’s why I got into this business, folks. To make a difference.

I bring this up because it’s good to reflect from time to time on why we do what we do. I have always believed that electronic journalism isn’t just a job. It isn’t even a career. It’s a way of life. If you aren’t driven, at least on some level, to make a positive difference in your community, then you may be in this business for the wrong reason.

We all know people who do what we do because seeing or hearing themselves on the air, or reading their own bylines, stokes their egos. We all have met people who do this only for their bank accounts, jumping from market to larger market, two-year contract to larger two-year contract, in hopes they’ll make the big-time and its fabled seven-figure deals.
Chairman’s Column

Don’t get me wrong. Because what we do makes a difference, we should be paid well. Very well. But too often the big paychecks go to people merely because they can read, and because they sound or look good doing it. Never mind that they couldn’t name the secretary of state or even one local congressman if their bank accounts depended on it. No matter that they couldn’t intelligently ad-lib their way out of the proverbial wet paper sack.

Thankfully, there are plenty of examples of people who do this thing called electronic journalism for the right reasons. If you ever doubt it, just look at each year’s Murrow winners. That’s more than enough to restore your faith in the truism that what we do makes a difference.

Early one Saturday morning while I was still working in Springfield, I dropped by my newsroom. On the police scanners, I heard officers being dispatched to a radio station across town. A worried listener had phoned 911 because she had heard dead air after the end of a song and couldn’t get anyone to answer the request line. I found out later that when the cops arrived, they looked in the window and saw someone collapsed on the studio floor. They broke down the door, only to find the deejay passed out drunk.

The man who years earlier had motivated me to become a newsmen never worked in the business again. The first part of his prophecy had come true, and well before he had turned 80. Maybe if he’d known that he had inspired someone to try to fulfill the rest of it—by working hard to make a difference and someday, perhaps, to be considered a statesman—he would have realized that he had made a difference too.—Dan Shelley is news director and assistant program director at WTMJ-AM in Milwaukee. You can reach him at dshelley@620wtmj.com.