

‘Stay alert to the things that have always interested you.’

Since the late 1950s, Clevelander's have been tuning in – first on radio and then on TV – to Fred Griffith's insightful, groundbreaking and often moving programs. But, as he sat and talked on the set of his current hour-long morning program at Channel 3, Good Company , it became obvious that, at 81, Fred is more than a charming, affable and unflappable on-screen host. He's also a keen, critical and pragmatic observer of “the human condition”; a long-time, but not obsessive, “foodie” who's written half-a-dozen cookbooks with wife Linda; and an extremely proud granddad.



**Fred Griffith**

Television host and  
cookbook author

**When and where were you born and raised?**

I was born in the Staats Hospital on West Washington Street in Charleston, West Virginia. I was born January 3, 1929.

**Tell us about your family: What your parents did, how many siblings you had, where you are in the sibling line-up?**

My grandfather was one of the organizers of the United Mine Workers, but was edged out of the union leadership, so he became a dairy farmer. My dad grew up on a dairy farm and delivered milk to restaurants. That's how he got involved in restaurants....By 1925, he owned a restaurant called the McFarland Lunch. It was on McFarland

BENJAMIN  
**ROSE**  
INSTITUTE  
EST 1908



Street , half-way between the Charleston Daily Mail and the Charleston Gazette , the city's two papers. Many of the reporters from the papers would come to the restaurant and that's one of the things that got me interested about being in journalism.

My dad and my mom married when my mom was about 21.

I was the first of six, three boys [Fred, Sam, Jerry] and three girls [Betty, Sally, Linda]. It was a pretty interesting family. A variety of characters.

**Born in 1929, you are definitely a “child of the Depression” and you came of age during World War II. How do you think both those historic events shaped who you are today? Or did they?**

Growing up in the Depression, we lived in this small little house – packed in – and I thought that was the way everyone lived at the time. And with my father being in the restaurant business, in spite of the fact that there was a Depression, we didn't worry about food. So, at the time, I never really thought much about it.

When the war came, that's when I was aware of what was happening. My dad couldn't keep anyone at the restaurant because they were all going into the army, so from the time I was 12 I was working in the restaurant. Not cooking. [Laughs] I was mopping floors, cleaning the copper pots, whatever needed to be done till I was probably a senior in high school.

I continued working there when I'd come home from college in the summers – except when I was doing my ROTC training. It was a 24-hour restaurant and by then I was on a short order cook on the night shift. That's when the cops and the truckers and warehousemen and the pressmen and reporters from the papers would come in.

**What do you think you learned there, at the restaurant?**

If you do things right, people will reward you...keep coming around. And I learned that from my dad. He was a good businessman, never using anything that was bad.

My wife [Linda] and I are very involved in the whole slow food movement – as opposed to fast food – and what's so amazing to me today is that when I look back on what my dad was doing at the restaurant, the way he shopped locally and preparing food, he was already there.

**What were you good at in school?**

I always had good grades, but I suppose I was good in English and always used the language well.

My father only finished the fourth grade. When he started working in the restaurant, all these intelligent news guys who'd gone to college would come in and they'd talk about important books in history and culture and things like that. Ultimately my father bought Dr. Eliot's Five Foot Shelf, The Harvard Classics, and he read every one of them – and reread them. He bought a set for me. I still have the books, but I know he read more of those books than I did.

**What did you not like in school?**

I can't say that I didn't like anything. I had good teachers. And it was public school all the way. But I wasn't as good in math as I might have been. I think I just la-de-daded along and was good in what interested me. [Laughs] But for the most part, everything was interesting to me.

When you started West Virginia University in 1948, were you planning on a career in the broadcast industry? Or maybe communications?

My father wanted me to study law because he thought that would be a great way to ensure that I never had to wash dishes. But that didn't interest me, at all. When I went to college I became a pre-

engineering student. I caught up on the math I needed and I took the basic science classes that I needed. But, at the time I was there, there was a whole bunch of very bright guys in school on the G.I. Bill. They really turned me on to learning. And then I took a course in philosophy – the professor was William Sherman Minor– and the next thing you knew, I was a philosophy major.

**You majored in philosophy? A lot of people who do that end up in teaching. Ever think about teaching?**

That's what I thought I'd be doing, getting a PhD, and teaching. But I was working all the time in college – in a funeral home, at a boarding house – and there just wasn't any money for graduate school.

And the Korean War had started [in June of 1950] and since I was commissioned in ROTC in the Air Force, I had a military obligation and was looking at active duty. And I'd gotten married, too, to a sister of one of my friends.

That's when I decided to make the transition into journalism. While I was working at my dad's restaurant, I was doing interviews to get a newspaper job, but they always asked my military status. When I told them, they always said “Come see us when you get back.”

My uncle, a musician who had a local radio show in Charleston, told me that one of the other stations needed someone to read the news. The station was WGIP, and when I interviewed with the manager [Joe Herget], he forgot to ask my military status and hired me to do the morning news. [Laughs] And he also gave me some tapes from a station in Indianapolis to listen to because he said that I sounded too much like I was local. I had that Southern West Virginia accent. I was there only a couple of months before I was called up.

**Where did you serve and what did you do?**

I was assigned to Maxwell Air Force Base in [Montgomery] Alabama, which was where the new Air University was. I was there two years as a squadron adjutant, and the squadron I was in ran the air base. I didn't see combat duty because by the time I was finally called up the war had ended. I had a strictly administrative job and there was a lot of interaction with the civilian community.

After six months, I became a first lieutenant and my wife and daughter, Barbara, joined me there.

**What did you do after you left the Air Force?**

I came back to Charleston because there was a job waiting for me at the radio station [WGIP]. At first I was in the news department. Then I became head of News...and then I became programming Director. And I also was doing some writing – on classical music – for the Charleston Gazette. My mom loved classical music and I'd grown up with that kind of music.

**What brought you to Cleveland?**

I came in 1959. My family was growing and I knew that to make more money I'd have to be in a bigger market than Charleston. I had a friend from college in Cleveland, so I'd been to Cleveland several times and I knew it was a flourishing city. So when I knew I had to move to a bigger market I contacted Wayne Mack at WDOK, which at time was the classical musical station. I met with him and station owner Fred Wolf and [Laughs] they hired me to be the news person at the station because I knew classical music. Pretty soon I was doing public affairs and commentaries on local issues, too. And sometimes I'd cover Sunday opera.

While I was there [WDOK], I also began doing interviews that were aired on WVIZ, because Betty Cope, the general manager, had asked me to.

**You started out in Cleveland in radio, but most people know you from television. When and how did you make the leap from radio (WDOK) to in-front-of-the-camera TV?**

When WDOK became WIXI 1260, a rock station, things really changed at the station. And my role there diminished. In 1965, Betty Cope, manager at WVIZ, called with an offer and I went to WVIZ full-time, doing interviews and local issues and public affairs.

**When and why did you move to Channel 5?**

Shortly after moving to WVIZ, the general manager at Channel 5, Don Perris – the smartest guy I've ever known in broadcasting – asked me to produce the 11:00 pm newscast, so every day after finishing at WVIZ I'd go in to Channel 5 for the nightly news program... Eventually, he asked me to come to Channel 5 full-time, where I became the day-time news director and producer of Inner Circle, a public affairs program focused on the city and the region.

[Laughs] Taking the job at Channel 5 didn't just raise my salary, it shortened my workday, too.

**When you took over the Morning Exchange Program in 1972, you revamped the format, and turned it into one of the longest-running live shows in the history of TV. Why did you push for that change in the format?**

When Channel 5 started Morning Exchange, a two-hour morning show, Alan Douglas was host. He was a great night-time news guy, but not a morning talk show host. When he left the show, they asked me to fill in until they found a replacement. I said I would, but I also insisted that we didn't have a "desk" format – so we opened with us on couches in a living room setting – and that the people who were also involved in the show, Joel Rose doing news and Liz Richards doing weather, be "hosts," too.

With those changes, people really started watching the show. And we talked about

everything: sexuality, death and dying, and lot of other issues that TV just didn't deal with then. Our shows were about current things, things that affected peoples' lives, things that people wanted to know about and needed to know about.

**In its heyday, two-thirds of local TV sets were tuned-in to Morning Exchange. But it went off-air in 1999. Over time, what had changed?**

Our time slot was one thing. Originally we were in the 8-10a.m. slot. We were opposite [NBC's] Today Show, and we never lost a ratings vote to them in 20 years. But when the new contract was signed with ABC [Channel 5's national affiliate] in the early 1990s, it said we had to air both hours of ABC's 7-9a.m. Good Morning America. That meant we had to push our show to the 9-11a.m. slot. And that meant we lost the early morning viewers, especially the busy women who were getting kids ready for school or were themselves getting ready for work. And things were sort of running out of gas, too.

**What was one of your favorite Morning Exchange programs?**

I'm not sure about "favorite," because it was a fun show and there were so many favorites, but I do think the most consequential one we did was a program that featured a woman, Frances Kerver, who was 39 and had severe uterine cancer. She had a friend who was a priest and psychologist – John Dulin – and he called the producer about doing a program with her. The producer talked to me and I thought it would be an inspired thing to do because it would open up the door for people everywhere to talk about this kind of thing.

On that morning, we talked with her for over an hour. Nothing was scripted, we just talked with her. And you know, when she died, at her funeral the church was packed. Not with family. She didn't have much family. The people who were at the funeral were people she'd touched that day on television.

You know, people tend to remember me for Morning Exchange, but while I was at Channel 5,

I was doing a lot of other things, including commentaries – probably about two a week – and public affairs programs and news broadcasts. Often, when Dorothy Fuldheim was away, I was her substitute. And I was always participating in community events, serving on committees, being spokesperson for organizations, things like that...And that's something I've continued to this day.

**When Morning Exchange ended, you were 70. You could have retired. Instead, you jumped to Channel 3, and you've been there ever since hosting what eventually became Good Company . Why didn't you retire?**

I wasn't ready to retire. I didn't look for the job at Channel 3, however. Linda and I had been writing and we were getting ready to do our sixth book [ Nuts, Nuts, Nuts, which was eventually nominated for the International Association of Culinary Professionals award], and leaving Channel 5 was going to open up more time for those kinds of things, and travel. We love to travel.

But Terry Moir, who'd moved from Channel 5 to Channel 3, called and asked if I'd be interested in doing a little TV at Channel 5. She proposed a 15-minute noontime program. That morphed into a half-hour program and that morphed into Good Company , an hour-long show that's been going now for six years. But, if Terry hadn't called, I'd have been happy doing what Linda and I'd planned.

**You've always been physically active – running and rock climbing. What got you interested in those hobbies?**

When Morning Exchange got going, I met the owners of Newman-Adler Sporting Goods and they suggested doing segments on fitness and camping. I was already a cross country skier – I'd been doing that for years – but they got me interested in winter camping and rock climbing and mountain climbing. [Laughs] This was rugged stuff.

Then I got interested in running, again, because of someone – Jim Klett from the Akron area – we'd had on Morning Exchange. He pushed running as a sport anyone could do that wasn't expensive – just the cost of a pair of running shoes – so I took it up. Pretty soon I was running five times a week and was getting ready to run my first marathon, but I fell on ice and broke my femur. Later on, when the impact of running began to affect me, I switched to walking, something I still do every day.

**You are in great shape today. What are you doing regularly to stay so fit?**

I don't smoke. I used to smoke – a lot – but I quit around 1970.

I walk every day. For me that's the main thing I'm doing. My aim is always 10,000 steps a day and so far [unsnaps a pedometer from his belt] I've done about 5,500. That's about 2 ½ miles. People need to be aware of how important walking and being active on a daily basis are for health and health maintenance.

And I'm doing some weight lifting, too. The weights aren't big or heavy – about 4 pounds each – and I don't make a big thing of it, but if I'm sitting at the desk at home, I'll pick them up and use them.

And I'm aware of my weight. Right now I'm about 170. And that's a good weight for me.

**You and your wife, Linda, have been writing cook books – a couple of which have won national awards – since 1990. What got you interested in that?**

I've always been interested in food and cooking. When I was in the Air Force, I was in a men's cooking club, and when I came to Cleveland, one of the first people I met was [sports entrepreneur] Nick Mileti, and he loved to cook. Pretty soon I was in another men's cooking club.

When I married Linda in 1981, it was a marriage of two “foodies” who were also good writers.

By 1984, we were looking for something that was food-related we could do together. We looked into opening a market like Russ Vernon's West Point Market in Akron – he wanted us to do it – but when we studied it we realized we didn't have the business background. Then someone suggested we do a cookbook – because we were both cooks and both writers – so we went to New York City and pitched some ideas to an editor at Viking Publishing. He didn't care for any of our ideas, but he suggested we do a book about mid-west cooking. That was our first book, *The Best of the Midwest*. Then we did *The New American Farmbook*, , and really got swept into the food movement. The next book was *Onions, Onions, Onions*, which won the James Beard Award. After that we did *Cooking Under Cover*, about one-pot meals, and *Garlic, Garlic, Garlic*.

We worked really well. I did the driving and the essays for the books and Linda did the food research and the recipes.

### **Since you've been writing about food for 20 years, what are some tips you can share with readers about healthy eating?**

Be prudent and eat consciously. You have to know what you are eating and take into account how the food you eat is going to affect you. And if your cholesterol count is marginal, or climbing, adjust what you are eating.

Eat more boiled things, more broiled things, more steamed things. But that doesn't mean tasteless things. There are all kinds of ways to flavor foods to keep the fat and calorie levels down.

I don't deny myself, but I don't overdo it. I eat smart. I eat in moderation. And I don't obsess.

### **The MythBuster program is all about successful aging. What's your definition of successful aging?**

It's staying alert to the things that have always interested and challenged you over the years. But it's also getting involved in new things. For instance, if you don't know anything about the Internet, learn about it.

It's staying in touch with society and the things around you. For me, that means reading newspapers daily and staying current with things via the Internet.

It's paying attention to your health. [Laughs] When Linda says it's time for my physical, I go to the doctor.

### **Is there anyone in your life who you think shaped your views on aging, and what it means to age successfully?**

I think my parents showed me what it is by example. My dad worked until he was 75 and he lived another decade after that. He was always reading, always learning something new. My mom lived a couple of weeks past her 99th birthday. She was alert and engaged up till the last few weeks. She had a great attitude toward life, and I think I picked that up.

### **What did I not ask that I should have?**

About Linda's and my kids. We have five kids: three are mine and two are hers. And between us we have 10 grandkids. And everyone seems to have turned out well.