

People

'Ah, Zoh'

Talk-show host
airs on the side
of hot issues

By Stephanie Shapiro
Staff Writer

In the studio of a shabby Owings Mills radio station, Zohara M. Hieronimus adjusts her earphones and prepares for launch into talk-radio hyperspace.

After a tinkly musical cue, she begins a bewildering monologue — a "Late Morning Show with Zoh" trademark — that leapfrogs from Passover's celebration of freedom to whether the Red Sea's parting was a natural or supernatural occurrence to a savage attack on Oliver North, who is a guest host on Rush Limbaugh's national radio talk show for a few days.

"How do you feel about deceiving the American people? How do you feel about others going behind Congress' back and dealing in weapons or drugs or whatever with covert money?" she rhetorically asks Mr. North.

She demands further, "While your cute little statement 'broadcasting from a bunker in Washington' went across the airwaves yesterday, why don't American citizens have any bunkers?"

Ms. Hieronimus careens from one hot-button topic to another with syntax-murdering zeal. Pelting listeners with opinions, she follows her own script and refers to highlighted passages from five newspapers she reads daily in preparation for the show.

In a vitriolic news recap, Ms. Hieronimus takes on *New York Times* commentator Leslie Gelb's waffling position on the Bosnian war, Zbigniew Brzezinski's new book, violations of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, germ warfare and President Clinton's plan to ensure that all American children are vaccinated.

"At 2 months old, let's shoot our babies full of poison," she modestly proposes, oozing sarcasm and sublimated fury.

Zoh Hieronimus is a rarity as a female talk-show host, and in her fondness for pushing hot buttons all over the political spectrum.

MARK BUGNASKI/STAFF PHOTO

See HIERONIMUS, 4L, Col. 1

Listen to Zoh go: from the Red Sea parting to

SUNDAY, APRIL 18, 1993

HIERONIMUS, from 1L

Oliver North to the evil of inoculation

"Ah, Zoh," she answers herself, with weary wonder at the world's follies. The control panel blinks with calls.

On WCBM (AM 680), a local talk-radio station known for its conservative, masculine focus, Ms. Hieronimus — feminist, founder of a holistic health center, heiress, libertarian, advocate for the death penalty, one-world-government-conspiracy theoretician, humanist, earth being, bunker builder — has found her voice.

"She feels like she's found her life's work in radio," says Lee M. Hendler, one of Ms. Hieronimus' two older sisters. Talk radio is "where all of her talents come to bear. She has one of those wonderful minds. If she cares about it, she retains it."

As a female talk show host, Ms. Hieronimus, 39, is a rarity, although her ranks are growing, according to the National Association of Radio Talk Show Hosts. In November, she was hired to take over the troubled 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. time slot occupied in the past by Rudy Miller, among others. This week, the winter Arbitron ratings book will rule for the first time on Ms. Hieronimus' sonorous voice, slippery segues and unfettered politics.

The granddaughter of philanthropist Joseph Meyerhoff, and the third daughter of Harvey M. and the late Lyn Meyerhoff, Ms. Hieronimus has always understood that public service was a birthright.

But while her family builds temples of mainstream civilization — a symphony hall, hospital research centers, the Holocaust Museum — Ms. Hieronimus' philanthropic activism exhibits a fiercely independent

interpretation of the public good.

Nearly 10 years ago, she founded the Ruscombe Mansion Community Health Center, which houses offices for practitioners of acupuncture, rolfing, massage, homeopathy, as well as the Institute for the Study of the Imagination.

New Paradigm

With husband Robert R. Hieronimus, a syndicated radio talk show host, she runs a pro bono production company that offers unsolicited ideas and research about the New Paradigm (a term she prefers to New Age) movement to the mass media.

Last month, the Hieronimuses launched a program to establish four Little League teams in honor of Baltimore Negro League players. The program was funded through a \$15,000 grant provided by the Children of Lenore P. and Harvey M. Meyerhoff Philanthropic Fund of the Associated Jewish Community Federation.

Since childhood, Ms. Hieronimus, a tiny woman with penetrating green eyes and close-cropped hair going to gray, has always taken the wayward path.

She was an athletic, shrill, stubborn child. If she didn't want to eat, she didn't eat, her father says. He named her Jill and called her Beans, short for string bean. Later, she would change her name to Zohara, "soul of life," a name derived from the cabbala, the Jewish system of the occult. Mr. Meyerhoff still calls her Beans.

Ms. Hieronimus has always expressed righteous anger at social inequities and an innate distrust of authority, her family says.

She was also a "clairvoyant" child, who routinely saw ghosts, angels and frightening astral creatures, Ms.

Hieronimus says. She does not dismiss the possibility that she was once abducted by a UFO.

"Jill was always playing with the edge of life, that was my sense," says her sister Mrs. Hendler.

One of Ms. Hieronimus' most definitive experiences came at age 3, when she deliberately plunged into deep water in the family pool. "There I was, drowning in the pool, and all of a sudden the Blessed Mother, as I have come to know her . . . this enormous, radiant, beautiful being urged me toward the light."

Somehow, she was pulled from the water.

It was, "My first psychic crisis that there are limits as to what we can or cannot do. . . . My smallness was I think in part why I became fearless. It was to cover up some form of insecurity," Ms. Hieronimus says.

At an early age, Ms. Hieronimus embarked on a study of world religious traditions. She refused to be confirmed in Sunday school. "I regarded my spiritual life as so sacred, so holy, so central to my whole self identity, I didn't want to stand up in front of bunch of strangers who couldn't care less about me."

She also balked at being "contain-erized by what people perceived a Meyerhoff to be: You were conservative. . . . You get married, you have children, you serve in Associated Jewish Charities, and you live a rather mundane, normal life being integral to your community."

RUSCOMBE'S MISSION

Every year, 6,000 visitors to the Ruscombe Mansion Community Health Center in Northwest Baltimore take advantage of alternative healing remedies ranging from acupuncture to zero balancing, a form of therapy that resembles chiropractic.

In addition to offering services such as Jungian astrological consulting, self-defense instruction, herbal therapy and homeopathic medicine, the health center on Yellowwood Avenue also houses a weekly organic food co-op; an Egyptian room, where visitors may meditate on a gold throne; a fish pond; and a greenhouse, now being revitalized.

In its brochure, Ruscombe's professional staff of 24 assures visitors: "Our goal . . . is to support the natural healing process within the individual, emphasizing the use of non-toxic and non-invasive procedures." For Zoh Hieronimus, Ruscombe's founder, that guarantee is the fulfillment of a calling she had in 1975 to build an alternative health facility. She says that a good amount of the trust fund income available to her goes toward keeping Ruscombe "in the black."

Open nearly 10 years, Ruscombe is run by consensus. Staff members meet regularly to voice concerns, meditate and discuss chosen topics. One psychotherapist who works there says the center is less like a health clinic and "more like a family, or a bunch of people sharing a house."

Ms. Hieronimus was diagnosed with Crohn's disease, a chronic intestinal inflammation. Her parents never told her what she was suffering from, fearing that their daughter's adventurous nature would be squelched if she knew she had a chronic illness.

That decision did more harm than good, Ms. Hieronimus says. "It shortchanged me [by preventing me from] being able to start addressing my illness," she says.

Ms. Hieronimus attended Washington University as a dance major, but dropped out after suffering a back injury while working out with the Maryland Ballet. From there, she wandered: to Colorado, New Mexico, New York City, where a yoga class allowed her to shed a confining back brace.

In the course of her travels, Ms. Hieronimus returned to Baltimore, where she met Bob Hieronimus, the leader of the Aquarian University of Maryland and a commune called Savitria, both located at Ruscombe Mansion, on Yellowwood Avenue in Baltimore.

Later, when they became reacquainted, Ms. Hieronimus knew she had met her future husband. "What really saved me was meeting Bob. I don't know where my life would have gone," Ms. Hieronimus says. The two shared a passion for the esoteric arts, spiritual inquiry and a commitment to educating the public, she says. "We were like two little happy peas in a pod."

Shortly before they were married, Ms. Hieronimus was again stricken with the symptoms of Crohn's disease and underwent a resection of the intestine. After surgery, she rejected recommended drug therapy for acupuncture, homeopathy, an organic diet, psychotherapy, chiropractic and stress management. Today she is healed, Ms. Hieronimus says.

The Ruscombe health center, which grew out of Ms. Hieronimus' own search for alternative healing methods, opened in 1984 on the site of the disbanded commune.

Ms. Hieronimus' days are spent nurturing Ruscombe and spending time with daughter Anna, born in 1987. She also crams for her daily

the radio station by 7 a.m. to scour the newspapers.

Like her other contributions, Ms. Hieronimus' radio programming reflects her eclectic public service efforts.

One day, she cheerfully quizzes psychic Gordon Michael-Scallion on why a third of the continental United States will soon tumble into the sea.

On another, Ms. Hieronimus questions the authority of the IRS to audit tax returns and fingers the United Nations as part of a conspiracy to create a one-world dictatorship. On a laid-back, rainy Friday, she takes a nostalgic look at old-time radio. The next Tuesday, it's real-life vampires.

Murky ideological ground

As Ms. Hieronimus traverses her New Paradigm frontier, she often lands on the murky ideological turf where far right meets far left.

Not surprisingly, critics from both political poles take aim. Ms. Hieronimus is frequently tweaked on air by conservative colleagues. She is also derided by progressive listeners who fear she is WCBM's sacrificial liberal lamb.

Even Ms. Hieronimus' other sister, Terry Rubenstein, a staunch Democrat and gun-control supporter says, "Sometimes, I'll be driving along, [listening to Zoh, and I'll think], 'I can't believe she said that.' . . . I've cautioned her on a few things."

But, adds Mrs. Rubenstein: "She's right, if she's cautious, she's not going to be effective."

Mr. Hieronimus, whose 21st Century Radio's Hieronimus & Co. program airs on WCBM Sunday nights, is delighted with his wife's forceful on-air personality. "I would love to see her go against Rush Limbaugh," he says, referring to the nationwide king of talk radio. "She could tear him to pieces."

"She's utopian, she wants everybody to get a fair shake," says Tom Marr, Ms. Hieronimus' on-air sparring partner and WCBM office buddy.

Ms. Hieronimus freely admits that her convictions escape political pigeonholes.

THE HIERONIMUS FILE

Occupation: WCBM talk-show host, guiding spirit of Ruscombe Mansion Community Health Center.

Married to: Robert R. Hieronimus, (a.k.a. Dr. Bob), syndicated talk show host, author of "Your Personal Winning Lottery Numbers," muralist.

Daughter: Anna, who just turned 6.

Siblings: Terry Rubenstein, Lee M. Hendler, Joseph Meyerhoff.

Favorite childhood book: "The Yearling," by Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings.

Favorite grown-up book: "Ulysses," by James Joyce.

Favorite way to relax: Taking a bath.

Loves: Kosher dill pickles.

Diet: Was a total vegetarian until the urge struck while she was pregnant to eat a cold-cut sub. Still pigs out at Subway Sandwiches on occasion.

Next project (she hopes): To create an inner-city home for unwanted children.



Zoh Hieronimus

Simplistic assumptions are "what get us into a fine mess to begin with," Ms. Hieronimus says. Her measure of political and social viability is "anything that contributes to a just and sustainable future."

As New Paradigm crusaders, Zoh and Bob Hieronimus often cross swords with the mainstream media, which are "very much dominated by corporate America's perspective," Ms. Hieronimus says. "All the way from what stories they'll do, or which they'll soften up or won't do, to the cover-up of the danger of nuclear energy and nuclear radiation, the poisoning of citizens and why so many people have cancer."

Qualified sympathy

She has qualified sympathy for the John Birch Society and Lyndon LaRouche. "These groups have attracted thousands and in some cases millions of followers. There must be something in there that addresses their emotions and intellectual needs," Ms. Hieronimus says.

In her briefcase, Ms. Hieronimus keeps a booklet that lists members of the Council on Ecoville Relations, "a

supposedly innocuous little group of 2,000 insiders who . . . put out policy review." In fact, she says, the council's goal is a "very deliberate plan to undermine the sovereignty of our nation."

The goals of the New Paradigm will nevertheless prevail, if not in this century, then another, Ms. Hieronimus says. "I believe we will at some point or other manifest our divine inheritance," she says. But, "a world conspiracy can really screw it up for a couple millennum."

Bulging with thousands of files, books, keepsakes, collectible toys, baseball memorabilia and photos, the Hieronimus' Baltimore County home, a gift from her parents, reflects a strong faith that civilization will not expire soon. The couple are in fact building a larger home, with a geodesic dome and broadcast studio, that will accommodate their consuming passions, which range from Babe Ruth to the Beatles to saving the rain forest to the symbolic power of the pyramid-and-eye emblem on the reverse side of the Great Seal of the United States.

But Ms. Hieronimus is also prepared for the worst. Certain that war, environmental disaster or social unrest will soon converge with world religious prophecy to cause a cataclysmic event, she, her husband, and several other families have built an underground shelter somewhere in Baltimore County equipped with two months' worth of food and water. "There are no empty beds, there's no room at the inn," she says with a laugh.

Ms. Hieronimus is also amassing a small arsenal. "I am getting guns, a revolver, a semiautomatic and a rifle. I own a shotgun and I'm going to get a permit to carry a gun," Ms. Hieronimus says.

"If we go through a time period in this country of natural disasters . . . that shut down all municipal services, even for a week, what do you think people are going to do who have no food already in their homes?"

"I don't want to die over a loaf of bread," Ms. Hieronimus says. "I just think my life is worth more than that. . . . It's a Boy Scout-prudent thing to do. Be prepared."