CHARLIE MAYER

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LUKE DISTELHORST

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Top: Rachel Henighan outside the cabin—or *hasha*—of a Kazak family in western Mongolian. Inside, she and husband Charlie Mayer found hospitality and a portable radio tuned to the Gobi Wave—essential listening for thousands of nomads across Mongolia.

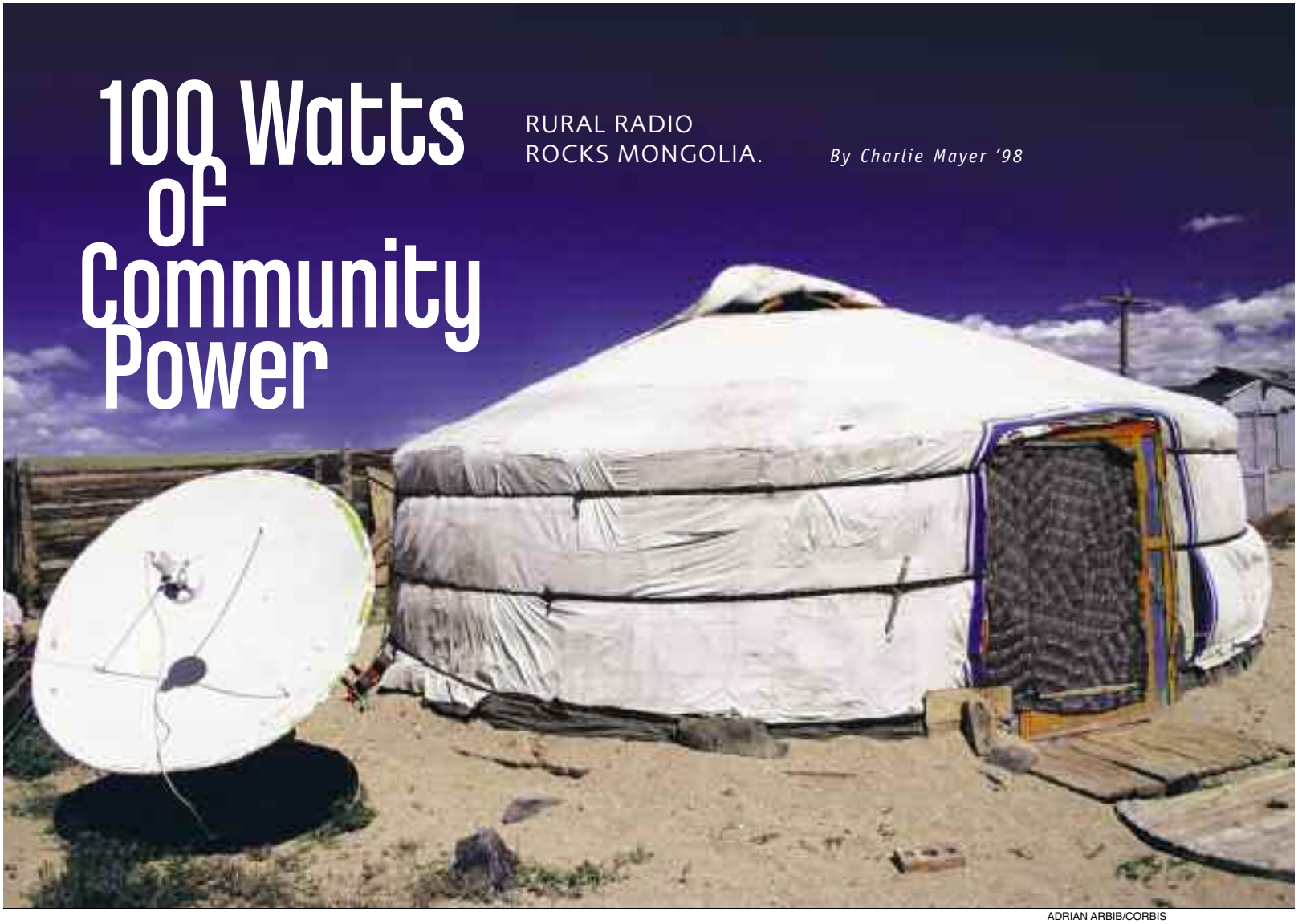
Above: Enkhtsetseg of Gobi Wave records a herder's greeting to far-away family members. She will later play it on the air.

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS

100 Watts of Community Power

RURAL RADIO ROCKS MONGOLIA.

By Charlie Mayer '98



ADRIAN ARBIB/CORBIS

Many rural Mongolians have both televisions and radios but receive little national programming that has local interest. Local stations, broadcasting in both FM and long-wave, provide a sense of community across the sparsely populated Gobi Desert and other parts of Mongolia.

Dalanzadgad—the capital of Mongolia's South Gobi province—is the middle of nowhere. When we found ourselves 100 kilometers from Dalanzadgad at dusk, we were 100 kilometers from nowhere.

It was early March. Wind blasted across the vast expanse of the Gobi. It was clear and dry. As the sun dipped behind the mountains, the sky turned pastel shades of pink. The dirt track ahead of our Land Cruiser became harder to see and more treacherous.

As we rounded a barren hill, the camels were unmistakable. At least two dozen of them cocked their heads to see what was coming. We stopped to visit. The camels belonged to a family that also herds goats and sheep on that arid land. Men and women, children, and the family dog greeted us as we dismounted our SUV. I sat on a camel briefly before we went into the family's *ger*, the round felt tent that has been home to Mongolian nomads since ancient times.

We bustled in and unzipped our winter clothes. We drank fresh camel's milk as the herder asked us who we were and what we were doing in his neighborhood. When he found out that we were with the local radio station, he got very excited and asked if he could record a greeting to his parents in another part of the Gobi.

With no telephones, no Internet, and no transportation infrastructure to speak of, radio is community in many parts of rural Mongolia. Hundred-dollar satellite dishes, which rural families set up outside their gers, downlink television news from dubious sources in Ulaanbaatar or China. There is almost no credible TV broadcast for the local area. That's where radio comes in.

My first encounter with rural Mongolian radio came one chilly night in October 2005. My wife, Rachel Henighan '97, and I were on an ill-advised 4-day drive in Mongolia's far western Bayan Ulgii province. With darkness and cold descending, we found warmth and hospitality in an old

LUKE DISTELHORST

Mayer and his brother Simon help Mongolian technicians install a new FM transmitting antenna atop the building that houses the Gobi Wave.

CHARLIE MAYER

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A deejay at a station in Sukhbaatar works in a studio that occupies a tiny first-floor apartment in a Soviet-era apartment block.

LUKE DISTELHORST

Above: Khishgesuren is general manager of Orhon FM in Darkhan. "She and Naraanchimeg of Gobi Wave are the main movers and shakers in the world of Mongolian rural radio," Mayer says.

Left: The studio of Gobi Wave is housed in this building in Dalanzadgad.

CHARLIE MAYER

MICHAEL CULLEN

Charlie Mayer '98 took a break from his job at NPR to live in Mongolia for a year. Here, he solders cables for a new satellite dish provided by the U.S. Embassy. "That's what I did at WSRN, too," he says.

woman's one-room cabin. After we ate dinner and rolled out our sleeping mats, we sat in the dark and listened to the radio.

We heard news, music, and conversations from the provincial capital over a scratchy, long-wave frequency. Most people who live in Bayan Ulgii are ethnic Kazak. They are Muslim and speak Kazak. Most Mongolians are Buddhist and speak Mongolian. For our host, this 1-hour program in Kazak is her only daily link to life on the other side of the mountains that surround her world. She explained through a translator: "The radio is how I find out who has died and who has had a baby."

Months later, I met the man who produces that show for the Kazak listeners in Bayan Ulgii. He and a dozen other local radio leaders met in Ulaanbaatar to share ideas about how to keep their tiny stations alive. That challenge was my reason for being in Mongolia.

Rachel and I went to Mongolia on a Henry Luce Scholarship. We could have gone to just about any country in Asia to do just about anything. I chose Mongolia because of its rural radio stations. Colleagues of mine from the U.S. public radio community had worked with these stations. I went to continue that work.

The godfather of rural radio in Mongolia is also a huge figure in American public radio. Bill Siemering helped establish National Public Radio in 1971, He created *All Things Considered*, a national radio show that mixes news, interviews, reviews, and features. I have worked on that show on and off since high school. Siemering has visited Mongolia 10 times during the past decade to work on rural radio projects. He explains his passion like this: "I believe there are few social investments that have a broader reach or affect more people than effective local radio."

Indeed, the grassroots energy that powers rural radio in Mongolia is the same energy that built a robust network of more than 800 public radio stations in the United States. In Mongolia, that energy radiates from a very small group of community leaders, journalists, and technicians who struggle every day to keep their radio stations on the air. Each one of these stations operates on about $5,000 a year.

> "The most important goal of our radio station is to deliver to the public true, objective news," explains station manager Khishgesuren.

In Sukhbaatar, just over the hill from Russia, a team of young disc jockeys runs a tiny little station from a first-floor apartment in a crumbling old Soviet building. They play Mongolian pop and hip-hop out of a cheap Chinese computer loaded up with pirated music from their friends in Ulaanbaatar. They also produce the occasional news story and host live talk shows. A program called *Let's Meet* is a live dating show. Because this is Mongolia, where there is no time like the present, *Let's Meet* schedules dates immediately, while the show is on the air. Once a date concludes, one or both of the participants call in to give a report on how things went.

In Darkhan, halfway between Ulaanbaatar and the Russian border, the radio station has started broadcasting international news from the Voice of America (VOA) to supplement the local news in Mongolian. The VOA news is in "special English," meaning that it is read slowly for people who are trying to learn the language. "The most important goal of our radio station is to deliver to the public true, objective news," explains station manager Khishgesuren. In a town that is bursting with youth, she adds that, "It is now very essential for the people to learn English." And the radio is helping.

Of all the rural radio stations in Mongolia, the one with the broadest reach is the Gobi Wave in Dalanzadgad. It broadcasts on 103.6 FM to 16,000 people who live in the provincial capital. But three times a week, tens of thousands of listeners tune in as Gobi Wave broadcasts on long wave over a government transmitter to most of the Gobi. This is the program that connects and informs Gobi herders like the man who invited us into his ger to drink camel's milk at dusk.

With a Gobi Wave journalist holding a battered old microphone, the herder recorded a greeting to his parents. He wished them well and said that he, his family, and their animals were doing fine. The herder explained to us that he would not have a chance to visit his parents that year. The Gobi Wave carried his voice home.

Charlie Mayer is senior producer for NPR's All Things Considered. *Rachel Henighan teaches at a public elementary school in Washington, D.C. Excerpts from their Mongolia blog can be found with the on-line version of this article at www.swarthmore.edu/bulletin.*