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Defender of the Faith

When Jamie Allman left KMOV-TV to do PR for the Archdiocese of St. Louis, he showed up full of good intentions—and they paved a road to hell

BY GERI L. DREILING JULY 12, 2007 11:29 AM

Photographs by Mark Gilliland

For Roman Catholics, Sunday is traditionally a day of rest: morning Mass, a chat with Father afterward, brunch, the newspaper, a contemplative afternoon nap.

Unless the Catholic in question is handling media relations for the St. Louis Archdiocese.

On the afternoon of Sunday, January 9, Jamie Allman, the recently anointed spokesman for Archbishop Raymond Burke, found himself sitting at the center of a large conference room table in the otherwise empty archdiocesan offices on Lindell, completely surrounded by print, radio and television reporters. They wanted the archbishop's reaction to a defiant vote cast that morning at St. Stanislaus Kostka parish in North St. Louis.

Only 10 days before, Allman had been one of the reporters, a journalist with a bulldog reputation and the ability to provoke fear in any politician, CEO or bureaucrat. He'd arrive on the scene, microphone in hand and cameraman in tow, firing aggressive questions at the establishment.

Now the bulldog had turned PR flack, handpicked by the archbishop to handle public relations. And if the strategy was to shift negative attention away from the archbishop and onto the spokesman, it was working.

No issue was more divisive than St. Stanislaus. The 124-year-old Polish parish had operated under the control of a lay board for more than a century. Now Archbishop Burke wanted to bring it back under control of the archdiocese. The David-versus-Goliath story had captured the community's attention, and most everyone was rooting for St. Stan's.

To reverse public opinion, Allman hit the air and radio waves, recasting the story as a family fight over bylaws rather than a battle for control. St. Stan's board members were the problem, not the archbishop. On January 4, Allman told the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* that the board had "hijack[ed] a Catholic church."

Instead of convincing the public or hushing the parishioners, the remark conjured images of terrorists on airplanes—and deepened the rift. That Sunday, when parishioners voted 299-5 against turning over "all property, funds, and control to the Archdiocese of St. Louis," they also used the occasion to single Allman out for criticism.

“Lately, most of you have seen that we, the board of directors, are being vilified by some media through a newly hired, well-recognized archdiocesan mouthpiece,” said Bob Zabielski, the president of St. Stanislaus’ board. “What is being said is not completely true.”

It wouldn’t be the last time Allman would hear the charge that he wasn’t a straight shooter. But his task was not to defend his own performance, but rather to protect the archbishop. At the press conference, one reporter said that the issue boiled down to trust—or, rather, the parishioners’ lack of trust in the archbishop. Allman replied, “If you can’t trust the archbishop, who can you trust?”

The defender of the little guy had become the protector of the powerful. The question rang all over St. Louis, and months later, it still echoes: What was Jamie Allman thinking?

Television reporting and public relations are both about image. The image of Allman the reporter clashed with the image of him as a spokesman. And underneath the professional contradictions lay more personal contradictions.

Jamie Allman is an aggressive reporter with a reputation for being thin-skinned. He is a devout Catholic who converted to his faith during a bitter divorce. He is an investigative reporter who championed the little guy and then adopted the role of combative public-relations flack for an authoritarian religious institution. He is a local celebrity who likes the limelight but bristles at scrutiny. He is a man who took a job with the archdiocese as a way of serving his faith, yet, only four months later, faced rumors that he was about to leave.

To explore the question “What was Jamie Allman thinking?” you have to make one assumption at the outset.

Jamie Allman is a paradox.

A December 21, 2004, press release, printed on the formal letterhead of the Archdiocese of St. Louis, announced Allman’s appointment as spokesman. At the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, it landed on the desk of religion reporter Tim Townsend. A relative newcomer to town, he’d been covering what had become a raucous religious beat for about seven months. He didn’t know Allman’s reputation as a hard-hitting, sometimes annoying investigative reporter—but his editors did. When Townsend showed them the press release, they thought it was a prank and told him to check it out. “I think somebody is pulling our leg,” he recalls one editor muttering.

They had reason to be dubious. Allman’s newscasts had garnered 13 Emmys over 14 years. He’d done most of the research, conducted the interviews, written the scripts. His reports were presented in a black-and-white fashion, good against bad and, yes, David versus Goliath—only, back then, he was on David’s side.

When he broke the story that David Levin, a Regional Chamber and Growth Association consultant, was also a self-proclaimed psychic, it led the RCGA to pull Levin’s contract. When he reported that dead dogs were being boiled down in a rendering plant and the byproduct was going into pet food, the public outcry was so strong that Millstadt Rendering Co. promised to stop processing pet carcasses.

“By any standard, Jamie was a superb reporter,” says Frank Absher, a Saint Louis University journalism professor and former broadcaster. But as a reporter, he adds, Allman was charged with gathering the facts and presenting them. As a spokesperson, his task is “to create and maintain an image in spite of the facts.”

Allman started his new job on New Year’s Eve, arriving at the archdiocese with grand plans. He felt that Burke had the personality, if not the philosophical bent, of the beloved former Archbishop John May, and he wanted Burke to be viewed in the same soft light. On January 10, he told listeners of the KDHX (88.1 FM) show *Collateral Damage* that the archdiocese “needed more openness, because in the past you only had pictures of a dark chancery and a faxed statement.”

Instead of faxed statements, Allman gave provocative quotes. Perhaps too provocative.

On February 8, after the archbishop imposed interdict (a penalty just short of excommunication) on the board of directors at St. Stanislaus, he told the Associated Press, “The archbishop has no choice. After we give them everything they want, they just decided it wasn’t enough.”

Five days later, speaking on National Public Radio’s *Weekend Edition*, Allman told listeners that the interdict wasn’t designed to be a punishment but “to be medicinal in nature,” allowing the board to repent.

In a February article in the *St. Louis Journalism Review*, Don Corrigan asked Allman to respond to complaints about the heavy-handed treatment of St. Stanislaus; speculation by the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests that he was brought in to attack the credibility of

clergy-abuse complaints; and the frustration of Catholic-school teachers over the 10-year refusal to recognize its union, the Association of Catholic Elementary Educators.

“A lot of these groups are used to taking cheap shots at the church and Archbishop Burke with immunity,” Allman said. “Bullies don’t like someone who fights back. The real problem for them is that the archdiocese finally has someone who will stand up to them.”

That same month, when it was revealed that clergy-abuse victim Tim **Fischer** hadn’t received the apology letter from Burke required by a settlement agreement, Allman told local NPR affiliate KWMU (90.7 FM), “The archbishop has had this letter ready to go for two months now, but Mr. **Fischer**’s attorneys and the attorneys for SNAP simply haven’t bothered to give us Mr. **Fischer**’s address.” The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* stated: “It turns out that was not true.” The address had been sent in December.

Meanwhile, Allman’s bulldog approach was grating on the nerves of Catholic laypeople.

In a March letter to *SJR*, David Christen called Allman “a halfway decent journalist turned stooge,” and Mary Ellen Kruger wrote, “Let me get this straight. Jamie Allman wants to serve his church, he said, then he publicly calls Catholic parishioners, Catholic school teachers and men and women who were raped by priests ‘bullies.’”

The words “bully” and “Jamie Allman” frequently appeared in print together—sometimes used by Allman to describe critics, sometimes used by critics to describe Allman. Yet he also developed a reputation for being thin-skinned—and criticizing work not nearly so bold as his own work had once been.

His relationship with the *Post* got off to a rocky start when he e-mailed columnist Bill McClellan on January 2, asking if McClellan thought “it just OK to skate on the facts about a religious figure as long as he’s Catholic?” Allman added, “I know all the world’s a stage and there are no ‘real’ friends in the business, only ‘fair game.’” McClellan reproduced the entire e-mail in his column and says he viewed the e-mail as “a clear effort to bully me. It wasn’t an isolated thing. Jamie had come onto other people at the paper in a very strong and aggressive way.”

Throughout all local media, Allman became, and remained, part of any story about the archdiocese, until even he grew tired of the attention. “I am not the story and do not intend to be and already too many have unfairly used me in that fashion,” he told *St. Louis Magazine* in early March. He remained reluctant for several weeks before finally consenting to an interview. Afterward, his answers to follow-up questions veered from gracious to wary. He later apologized, explaining, “It comes from being battered that people get edgy and suspicious.”

As a schoolboy, Allman would prop a pencil between the metal tongs of a three-ring binder and speak into the end as if it were a microphone. Journalism was the only constant in an otherwise untidy life.

He was born on March 12, 1963, in St. Louis, the youngest of six children—and the one named James J. Allman Jr., in honor of their father.

James Sr. had been reared in the Roman Catholic Church. He graduated from St. Louis University High School and married Martha Limbert, a Protestant, in the Catholic

Church. But soon after Jamie was born, his parents' marriage disintegrated, and he was raised an Episcopalian.

“My father just fell away from the Catholic Church. It is still a big mystery to me,” he says. “In fact, I asked a friend of his if he knew, but he wouldn't talk about it.”

James Sr. worked in public relations, directing community relations for the St. Louis Police Department. Then, when Jamie was 8, his father left St. Louis for a teaching job in Texas. Allman remained with his mother, seeing his father on weekends and in the summer.

“My father is idealized because I miss him,” he says now, “and because I missed him most of my life. I saw him in airplanes and cars, and all the texture—music, movies, nostalgia—is wrapped up in him.”

Allman grew up in University City, where he went to public school but played soccer and basketball with the Catholic-school kids at Christ the King. “I was a B-team Catholic, as they call it,” he says. “Maybe this was my mom kind of throwing a bone to my dad.”

He was close to his mother always, admiring her strength. “She and I were quite the team during a very troubled time in my life,” he says. By the time he reached high school, though, he was ready for male role models and mentors. That's when he met Bob McCabe, a former Catholic priest who would later become an on-air radio personality at KWMU. McCabe helped Allman and several other students start the University City High School drama club—and even loaned Allman his brand-new dark-cherry Oldsmobile Starfire for the 10th-grade homecoming.

Allman also made friends with then-KMOV-TV night anchor Julius Hunter. “He was a bright-eyed guy dating the girl next door to me in U. City,” Hunter says, remembering how many questions Allman asked. “He expressed an interest in getting in the business, and I told him, ‘All that glitters is not gold.’”

At the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Allman decided to work his way up to NPR, as his mentor, McCabe, had. After graduating, he worked at radio station WTDY in Madison, covering city hall and state government. Television reporter Steve Levitan, who later produced the sitcom *Just Shoot Me*, encouraged him to try his hand at TV. By 1986, Allman was hosting and producing a public-affairs show for ABC affiliate WKOW.

That same year, Allman married Lianne Keoff. Three years later, they moved to St. Louis. Allman had gotten a job at KMOV-TV, manning the overnight news desk from 11 p.m. to 8 a.m. After leaving the news desk in the morning, he'd report a story, often finishing between 2 and 3 that afternoon. He'd go home and catch some sleep, then start the cycle all over again. It got him noticed, and the 1990s brought not only a rising profile at Channel 4 but local-celebrity status in St. Louis.

While Allman's career flourished, his marriage foundered.

After 13 years and two children, the couple separated. In early 2000, Lianne filed for divorce, citing “irreconcilable differences.” A bitter and hostile series of court clashes followed. When the family home was sold and the sale price didn't cover the outstanding mortgage, the divorce decree stipulated that Jamie and Lianne split the debt of approximately \$34,000. But Lianne, who made about \$35,000 a year working for a credit union, compared with

Allman's \$81,000-per-year income, couldn't come up with her half. Allman got a judgment against her and garnished her bank accounts. She filed for bankruptcy. Acting as his own attorney, he fought back, interrogating her at hearings. But the bankruptcy judge concluded that Lisanne couldn't make ends meet each month and relieved her of the debt.

Asked about his divorce, Allman says, "I'm so focused now, and so is my ex-wife, on raising these wonderful children, that I just can't imagine, and I know she couldn't imagine, going back there. We don't have anybody to discuss that with, other than, ultimately, God."

Allman says it was the "absolute blowup of my family" that ultimately drove him through the doors of the Catholic Church. But he first thought of converting after his father's death in 1997. James Sr. had spent the last decade of his life in St. Louis, drawing closer to the son who was named for him. "In my opinion, my father returned to the church in death," Allman says. "He died at St. Mary's Hospital in the presence of nuns, one of them holding his hand. It had a lot of weight to me that in the end of his life, he returned to the church."

The next year, KMOV-TV reporter Mary Phelan died in a car crash. Through her death, which affected him deeply, Allman came to know the Rev. James Tobin, pastor of Phelan's church, Our Lady of the Pillar in Creve Coeur. Years later, when Allman's marriage disintegrated, he sought out Tobin.

"I think he went through a time of searching for the meaning of life, of faith," Tobin says gently.

Allman embarked on twin paths of divorce and conversion. In April of 1999, he began taking Catholic-education classes. Two months later, according to court records, he and Lisanne separated. In June of 2000, Allman joined the Roman Catholic Church. Two weeks later, his divorce became final.

Allman says that, although his Protestant mother “is highly suspicious of the Catholic Church, she has been very supportive.” He admits explicitly to only one problem with church doctrine: the refusal to ordain women. “The whole ‘women are made to be in the background’ thing is quite foreign to me,” he remarks.

Allman says of his conversion, “I felt like I was coming home to what was once the faith of my father.” A few years later, he would also follow his father’s path into public relations—for the most patriarchal institution in town.

A handheld KMOV-TV news camera sits on a bookshelf in Allman’s archdiocesan office, the lens pointed at the guest chairs positioned directly across from his desk. When he comes around his desk to talk, it gives the illusion of a studio interview—until you glance up and see the large picture of Archbishop Burke that Allman had custom-framed.

Though Burke is far from being the little guy Allman championed as a reporter, it is clear that Allman views him as an underdog who has been unfairly treated by the media. “From the minute he got here, he’s been besieged by negative stuff,” Allman says hotly.

Still, it was Burke, not the media, who made pronouncements on how Catholics should cast their

votes; Burke who announced that he'd refuse to give Communion to Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry; Burke who imposed interdict on the directors of St. Stanislaus.

Allman was approached by the archdiocese about the job, not vice versa, and he initially refused: "I think I sensed it was going to be troublesome," he says ruefully. But he'd grown weary of investigative reporting. "As you mature and you realize that people make mistakes and do dumb things and not everything is black and white, it becomes harder and harder to do your job as a journalist." Besides, he was 41. "I was not going to be covering a warehouse fire when I was 50 years old," he says firmly.

He spoke with his wife, Andrea Fellin Allman, whom he married on June 30, 2001. Research director at KSDK (Channel 5) and a lifelong Catholic, Andrea knew her husband was exhausted working in both radio and TV, especially since the birth of their baby boy in September 2004. She'd also seen the peace his conversion had brought him: "He felt like the Catholic church was where he was supposed to be." But she worried that the archdiocesan job could, paradoxically, sour him on this newfound faith.

Allman was still deliberating when, for the December 15 *Riverfront Times*, he was asked a "Street Talk" question: "What would you like to ask God?" He replied, "How can I repay You? How can I be of service?"

A week later, he took the job, calling it "the opportunity of a lifetime. This is one of the highest awards I can receive, to be called to the service of my Church."

On January 10, Allman told the listeners of *Collateral Damage*, “I love my church. A lot of these guys, it is not their business and their calling to be in front of TV cameras. I could be of real value to the church in explaining their positions.” He said he knew he might become a lightning rod and it didn’t bother him.

But it would.

“It is very, very difficult to be, in your church—and I’m not trying to be overly—this persecuted figure—it has been very difficult for me,” Allman says in stop-start fashion as he struggles to explain the toll the job has taken. “I expected judgments and a certain level of disdain from non-Catholics but never expected it from Catholics—never.” Sometimes, he says, people look at him “like I’m Satan”; at other times, with pity. “In my own church I get looked at sideways.”

The reaction to his work has also spilled into his personal life. In March, he was eating dinner with his wife at their favorite restaurant when a man approached, middle finger extended high. “There must be a *special* for former journalists,” he snarled.

Allman blames “my perceived public persona from TV” for the vitriol. “Anything that comes out of my mouth is going to be perceived as, ‘Oh, look at this hotshot TV guy.’”

By spring, he had quieted his approach, working to attach Burke’s name to ecumenical and noncontroversial concerns. In early April, he even persuaded the archbishop to be photographed holding a basketball in the air for the *Post’s* Final Four special section.

Allman denies rumors that he's paid \$175,000: "It is way, way below that." He also denies using the position as a stepping-stone for a run at Congress. "It defies common sense to think that aligning yourself with a strong bishop is going to endear you to a multilayered group of Catholics," he says wryly.

Nor does he plan on being the spokesman forever. He says that after helping the archdiocese find its "public voice," he "will ultimately recommend that their public voice be someone with a collar."

It would be hard for him to go back to TV—he's lost his street cred—but even if he could, it no longer holds any appeal. "I couldn't be who I was as a reporter before," he says. "You have to almost cut out a piece of your humanity to do your work."

The prospect of returning to radio, however, still makes his eyes shine. Just four and a half months after he accepted his "opportunity of a lifetime," there were rumors that on August 1, he'd parachute out of the archdiocese and back into talk radio.

Asked whether the rumors are true, Allman says, "My ultimate goal would be that I don't have a job with the archdiocese because it would mean that things are going well, that the people who are at the top of the archdiocese are able to communicate by themselves very well. As a Catholic, I don't want to see, necessarily, Jamie Allman speaking for the archbishop. So, if it does happen, it will be a sign that all is well and good in the archdiocese."

As he speaks, church and Catholic-school closings are ongoing, the rift between St. Stanislaus and the archbishop is as wide as ever, battles between SNAP and

the archdiocese continue. It is hard to imagine that by August, all will be well and good.

That is Allman's parting paradox.

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