

She's the voice behind voice mail

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Staff Writer

Gaithersburg resident Pam Bassett is the voice on MCI's automated telephone systems, including voice mail and 1-800-COLLECT.

Gaithersburg resident Pam Bassett is a celebrity who flies totally under the radar of popular culture.

Though millions of people from across the country have heard her voice on numerous occasions, she said she has never been recognized.

Bassett is the voice at the other end of the line for millions of MCI customers who are checking their voice mail, using directory assistance, calling collect or using a long distance phone card.

As the English operator voice for the company, Bassett began in 1993 by spending three to four hours three times a week in a recording studio for more than two months.

She now goes into the company's studio in Ashburn, Va., about once a week to record new sound bites or to re-record some words or phrases she has already done.

Bassett, 42, first got interested in voice work when she made a mock radio commercial for her 10th grade journalism class.

"It was enough to get me thinking, well maybe I could do that," she said.

She went on to study radio, television and film at the University of Maryland and has worked at several radio stations, including the local Christian station WAVA. At the Arlington, Va.-based WAVA, Bassett did news reports and commercials and hosted a show called Musically Speaking.



J. Adam Fenster/The Gazette

Gaithersburg resident Pam Bassett is the voice on MCI's automated telephone systems, including voice mail and 1-800-COLLECT.

She was working at WAVA when she got a call out of the blue one day from someone at MCI asking if she would like to audition for voice work for the company.

"I didn't have to market myself," she said. "I was floored."

Bassett got the job and worked for a while at both MCI and at WAVA, though she switched to the sales division at the radio station.

Bassett said she once auditioned for voice work where she would have to play a part, but that kind of work was not for her.

"I think it's a neat fit because I don't have to be a character voice," she said.

She admits that hearing her own voice can sometimes be uncomfortable.

"I always critique myself," she said. "I don't usually give myself a pass."

When people think about voice work, they think it's just about talking, said Jeff Koenig, a senior network engineer for MCI who has been working with Bassett since 1994.

"But there's a lot more to it than that," he said.

They must have clear, clean diction and speak without any extra noise from such things as the movement of saliva in the mouth, Koenig said.

Telephones transmit a thinner or less full sound than the radio does because of its narrow frequency band, and voice talents also must be able to sound as natural as possible despite the thin sound, he said.

In addition to having those voice qualities, Bassett has been very cooperative working through the different takes, Koenig said.

"We've been really happy with her for some time," he said.

Tom Moyer, general sales manager at WAVA who is a former co-worker of Bassett's, described her voice as having a positive energy.

"I would say Pam has one of those naturally attractive voices," he said.

Some voices make people want to leave the room right away, and other voices make people want to hang around for longer, Moyer said.

"Pam's got a hang-out voice," he said.

Since beginning her work with MCI, Bassett said some unexpected perks have arisen, including checks in the mail from Sony Pictures after the studio used a selection of her voice work for 1-800-Collect in the 1999 Adam Sandler movie Big Daddy. In addition to working for MCI, Bassett has done voice work for, among others, Food for the Hungry, the American Society of Consultant Pharmacists and the Travel Industry Association of America. She has also done campaign commercials for U.S. Rep. Chris Smith (R-N.J.).

Bassett, now a mom, said she enjoys spending time at home with her daughter but would not rule out the possibility of doing more voice work. If an opportunity came along that met her criteria, including job flexibility, she would be interested.

"It's been really exciting just to not know what is around the bend next," she said.