

## Lines Down Cold, These Men of Timbre Will Sell Anybody

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Voice-Over Artist Lewman  
Reads Spots for Democrats;  
His Pal Pengra Touts GOP

By JOHN HARWOOD

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CLARKSVILLE, Md. — Under a bright morning sun, Lary Lewman strolls down the driveway, past his garden of cabbages, peas and strawberries, and into a converted milking barn. He snatches a sheet from the fax machine, takes a seat inside his recording studio and reads the message for the very first time, aloud into a microphone:

"D.G. Martin has earned the endorsement of newspapers across North Caro-



Lary Lewman

lina, for his years of public service and experience," he says in a smooth, rich baritone. "Martin is clearly the most qualified, intelligent and thoughtful. Martin is the best candidate, and best choice for U.S. senator."

Mr. Lewman doesn't know D.G. Martin — or any of the hundreds of other candidates whose campaign commercials he has narrated over the past two decades. "I've never met a politician in my life," he says.

But he's a big star in politics nonetheless. The gentle, bearded 61-year-old actor belongs to an elite corps of voice-over artists who perform on most of the TV and radio ads that already are flooding American living rooms in this election year. About a dozen men and women are able to earn \$500,000 or more in a good year because of the resonance of their voices and their ability to tout perfect strangers — and attack unknown opponents — with an air of utter, unaffected conviction.

"It's the best job in America if you can get it," says a grinning Mr. Lewman, who



Mike Pengra

at one time performed in dinner theater and appeared on a children's TV show. "Hell, man, it's like taking candy from babies."

With the advent of crystal-clear digital telephone lines, Mr. Lewman can do it all from his five-acre spread here an hour north of Washington. The scripts roll in so fast — one year he handled races in all 50 states — it's tough to remember the candidates, much less become attached to their causes. Right now, Mr. Lewman knows that he and his wife, Nancy, who is a voice

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## For Hire: 2 Voices of Authority

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talent in her own right, are on different sides of a U.S. House primary race in Kentucky, but he can't recall his man's name. Mr. Lewman's son and daughter-in-law are also in the business.

"It all becomes a blur," observes Mike Pengra, 59, another voice-over star, who lives down the road from the Lewmans here in rural Howard County and is a close friend. Mr. Pengra says he once inadvertently worked for both sides in the same race.

While corporate voice-over work is concentrated in New York and Los Angeles, political-ad talent remains mostly in Washington, where the media consultants are. The voice-over artists do commercial work, too, in their political down time. Men still dominate the field, though women have increased their presence lately, in part because they seem to be better at delivering attack lines without triggering a backlash from TV viewers. Political-ad announcers generally cast their lot with one party or the other. Mr. and Mrs. Lewman work for Democrats; Mr. Pengra these days hires out with Republicans.

Whatever the party, the artists' stock-in-trade is a familiar set of voice types: the blue-collar "Joe Sixpack," the friendly "Guy Next Door," and the deep and momentous "Voice of God," which Mr. Lewman says, "makes your bones buzz" when it is done correctly. "You drive the voice up into your head and maximize . . . power," he booms in demonstration. There's not much call for "God" anymore, he says. "That kind of authority is passe."

"Lary can do 'em all," says veteran political-ad maker Carter Eskew. "He has authority and warmth. He's believable."

Mr. Lewman's show-business career began nearly 40 years ago when he left his home in Indiana for a job at WBAL-TV in Baltimore. After five years there playing "Pete the Pirate" on a children's show, he needed a change. "I could see myself at 40 with a beanie and a propeller trying to get a job as a kid character."

In 1976, he recorded his first political ad for Democratic media consultant Robert Squier and broke through four years later as the voice of President Carter's disastrous re-election bid. His swelling bookings afterward demonstrated what Mr. Lewman calls an "amazing" law of the voice field: "We're not connected with defeats." (Mr. Martin, the North Carolina Senate candidate, lost his primary race earlier this month.)

### Friendly Adversaries

A few years later, he beckoned Mr. Pengra, who was a video producer with GOP ties in Washington, into the "high-yield, low-effort end of the business" after admiring his voice when the two worked together on a job. Soon they were toiling happily on opposing sides of some of the roughest election fights of recent memory, from the racially charged 1990 Jesse Helms-Harvey Gantt campaign for a North Carolina U.S. Senate seat to the battle for the White House between George Bush and Bill Clinton two years later.

"We don't even think of it as a competition," explains Mr. Lewman. The two men have attended election-night parties with their voice-over colleagues a couple of times in recent years, but Mr. Pengra says they don't pay much attention to the returns.

With the 1998 cycle still young, many of the spots they are reading now are simply meant to introduce candidates to voters. One afternoon, Mr. Pengra strolls into his basement studio, grabs a script from the fax machine, and gets on the phone with GOP media consultant Alex Castellanos. Mr. Castellanos wants "a lot of energy" for a spot to make California viewers remember the name of his candidate for lieutenant governor, business executive Noel Irwin-Hentschel.

"So this is not so much down-home warm," says Mr. Pengra.

"No, we're banging out name ID," responds Mr. Castellanos.

Mr. Castellanos coaches Mr. Pengra through different recordings of the 30-second ad, each flawlessly delivered, but with variations in emphasis on such lines as

"built an international company" or "working mom, seven children." Mr. Pengra credits his background as a jazz musician with enhancing his knack for phrasing. He currently also does radio spots for the Washington Post ("If you don't get it, you don't get it").

### Easy Money

After one final effort, the consultant announces contentedly, "That was a keeper." For 10 minutes' work on the phone, Mr. Pengra has earned about \$700.

The spots will become more negative as the year wears on. The preferred tone just now is incredulity punctuated with "Isn't it a shame?" sorrow about an opponent's deficiencies. "The writing may be a hatchet, but we wrap it in velvet," Mr. Pengra says. Sometimes, Mr. Lewman adds, consultants will simply say, "Let's make it a little meaner."

Mr. Lewman, struggling with hand tremors from the onset of Parkinson's disease, may stop doing campaign ads after this year to devote more time to gardening and writing poetry. An admirer of Shakespeare, he laments that TV ad scripts have grown a bit clumsier over the years as campaigns more and more let opinion polls dictate their messages.

While he is mostly indifferent to the contests in which he acts, his wife is much more the dyed-in-the-wool Democrat. Mr. Lewman cautions her against carrying political arguments too far. "She's always saying this and that about the campaign," he says. "I say, 'Wait a minute, babe, you learned that from the commercial. Beware.'"