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## Citizens share values in revived "This I Believe" radio series

By **Tyrone Beason**

*Seattle Times staff reporter*

"We hardly need to be reminded that we are living in an age of confusion — a lot of us have traded in our beliefs for bitterness and cynicism or for a heavy package of despair, or even a quivering portion of hysteria. Opinions can be picked up cheap in the marketplace while such commodities as courage and fortitude and faith are in alarmingly short supply."

**Legendary CBS newsmen** Edward R. Murrow spoke those words in a radio broadcast 54 years ago to introduce an experimental new program called "This I Believe," which gave prominent and everyday citizens a quiet forum to state their guiding life principles.

It was a counterintuitive idea. No rebuttals, no posturing, no putting other people down.

The nation loved it. Millions tuned in each day to hear the likes of Harry S. Truman, Helen Keller, Jackie Robinson and Albert Einstein talk about perseverance, integrity, individualism, responsibility and simple kindness.

"This I Believe" quickly grew into one of the most popular radio programs in the nation before the series unexpectedly lost its funding and ended in 1955.

But if Murrow, who died in 1967, felt so strongly about the need for such a show back then, what would he think of its value in today's superheated civic climate?

National Public Radio and a team of producers in Kentucky and New England, at least, felt it was high time to revive the show.

**Believe it!**

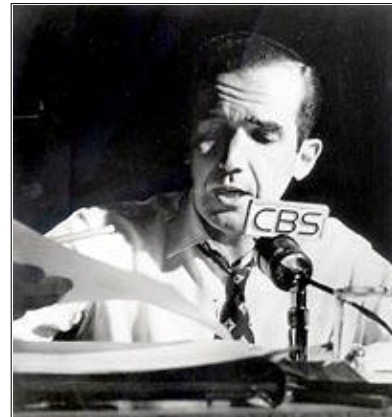
To learn more about "This I

This spring, "This I Believe" returned to the airwaves after 50 years, with weekly audio essays recorded in the same



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Sarah Adams of Port Orchard advises, "Be cool to the pizza dude" in her "This I Believe" audio essay.



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— *Edward R. Murrow*

**Believe,"** go to [www.npr.com/thisibelieve](http://www.npr.com/thisibelieve). The site includes information about the broadcast schedule, a link for people to submit essays and tips for how to write them. All new "This I Believe" essays aired on NPR are available in audio and print form on the site, and several archived essays have been recently added.

"open mike" vein as the original program. The three-minute segments air during NPR's rush-hour "Morning Edition" and "All Things Considered" broadcasts on alternating Mondays. In Seattle, those shows air on KUOW (94.9 FM) and KPLU (88.5 FM).

"There's no shortage of people judging other people, and arguing and ranting and disagreeing," "This I Believe" host and co-producer Jay Allison said by telephone from his home in Massachusetts. "I think these essays have a fundamentally different goal. In none of the essays is the author trying to get others to adopt their beliefs."

"As long as people write from the heart, then it opens the doors for others to understand them," he said.

Allison, a veteran public-radio producer ("Lost and Found Sound," "Hidden Kitchens"), admits his hope for the show is rather utopian, given his belief that today "everybody's sensitive and everybody has their guns drawn."

But Murrow's assessment of his own times — fear, mistrust, cheap political discourse — resonated with fellow producer Dan Gediman, who first got the idea to revive the series two years ago when he read those telling lines.

"I was thinking, 'Wow, this could have been written yesterday,'" said Gediman, who is based in Louisville, Ky. "We're at a particular crossroads in American popular culture where matters of faith and values are front and center."

Gediman, Allison and producers John Gregory and Viki Merrick figured "This I Believe" would offer a sanctuary from the rancor of some radio talk shows.

Since debuting in April, "This I Believe" segments have featured former Secretary of State Colin Powell, who spoke of America's openness to the hopes of immigrants; author Isabel Allende, who spoke of belief in the power of giving; and jazz composer Dave Brubeck. For tomorrow, Independence Day, the essayist will be conservative gay commentator Andrew Sullivan, who says he believes in "freedom of speech and of contact, the right to offend and blaspheme, as well as the right to convert and bear witness."

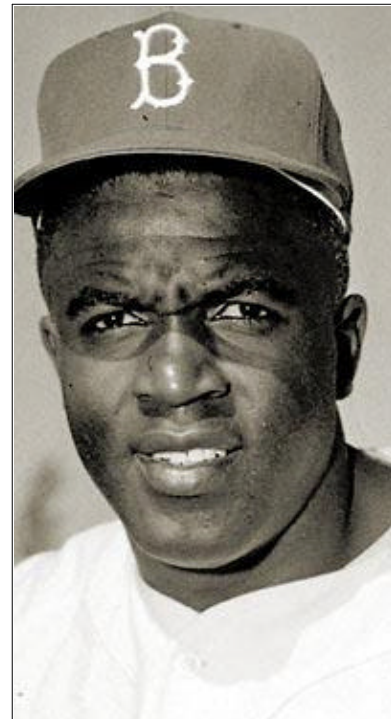
On the show's home page, [www.npr.com/thisibelieve](http://www.npr.com/thisibelieve), all of the audio essays can be downloaded, and several essays from the original '50s series are available.



COURTESY OF ELIZABETH EARLE  
Elizabeth Deutsch Earle with  
Edward R. Murrow.

"The one rule that could serve anyone in almost any situation is, 'To see what must be done and not do it, is a crime.' Sadly, I've fallen short of my optimistic youthful goal of 'doing what must be done.' I try to be a good friend to the people I know and support causes with broader goals that I respect, but recognize that my efforts have changed the world only in small ways."

— Elizabeth Deutsch Earle, 1954  
and 2005



"Whatever obstacles I found made me fight all the harder. But it would

When KUOW's "The Conversation" recently devoted a whole hour to personal beliefs, the phone lines were jammed with callers, host Ross Reynolds said.

"The whole idea of it goes a lot deeper than the usual debate program will allow," said Reynolds, who drew inspiration from "This I Believe" in devising that day's theme. "It's very personal; there's a different tone."

### Common voices

The producers of "This I Believe" have pushed hard to solicit essays from everyday people. They've received more than 3,000 submissions already.

Allison said the selection process is subjective but the winners are usually "the ones you can't get out of your head."

So among the voices of dignitaries, there's that of Sarah Adams, a college English teacher living in Port Orchard.

In her essay, "Be Cool to the Pizza Dude," Adams lays out a philosophy based on how well you treat even those with a fleeting, seemingly insignificant impact on your life. In her view, kindness to strangers also brings good luck.

Adams said she was inspired to write on that topic after listening to Powell's essay.

"His was about humble beginnings — that part of his message certainly helped make my decision," she said.

Adams's "pizza dude" metaphor stems from her college days in Madison, Wis., where she and her housemates often sustained themselves on pies.

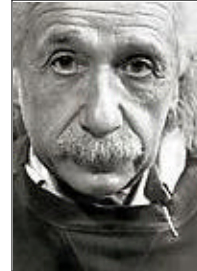
Encounters with pizza deliverers taught her to respect people with service jobs. Adams was once a short-order cook, telemarketer and hotel employee, so she empathizes with these workers, too.

"It's the first time that I've ever written into anything like this," Adams said of the essay, which was also the first time she had actually written down her guiding principles. "It's a very democratic exercise."

To further tie in the past essays with the current ones, the producers have tracked down people like Elizabeth Deutsch Earle, a scientist from Ithaca, N.Y., who recorded her first essay for the show in 1954 when she was 16, and who reflects on the evolution of her beliefs in a new essay that was broadcast last month.

At 16, young Elizabeth was committed to doing good works and

have been impossible for me to fight at all, except that I was sustained by the personal and deep-rooted belief that my fight had a chance — I say to my children: There is a chance for you. Not a guarantee, but a chance."  
— Jackie Robinson, 1952



"What is moral is not of the divine, but rather a purely human matter, albeit the most important of all human matter."  
— Albert Einstein, 1954



"I believe that the fundamental basis for a happy life with family and friends is to treat others as you would like to be treated, speak truthfully, act honorably and keep commitments to the letter."  
— Harry Truman, 1955



"I believe that the American of 2005 is the same American that brought Maud Ariel McKoy and Luther Powell to these shores — an America that gives immigrants the same gift my parents received — an America that sometimes seems confused and is always noisy. That noise has a name; it's called democracy."

finding a religious path that suited her. She settled on Unitarianism. Today, Earle's focus is on living in the moment — appreciating life as it comes — but also reaffirming her earlier vow to help others.

— Colin Powell, 2005

Many of the essays, past and present, touch on matters of faith, but the producers say that's not by design.

"You hear the word 'believe' and you say, 'Oh, I know what this is,' but really this is the exact opposite," Allison said. "It has no agenda. It's not from the right or the left."



"Give, give, give — what is the point of having experience, knowledge or talent if I don't give it away? ... I don't intend to be cremated with any of it! It is in giving that I connect with others, with the world and with the divine."

— Isabel Allende, 2005

### Branching out

Not only are the producers of "This I Believe" following Murrow's lead, they hope to attract the kind of loyal following his series achieved, even if they can't replicate the huge radio-audience numbers in today's busy TV, PC and iPod media blur.

At its peak, an estimated 39 million people listened to Murrow's daily "This I Believe" program each week. A companion book filled with essays recorded in the show's first season was a nonfiction best seller in 1952, second in sales only to the Bible, Gediman said.

Viking will publish a volume of 100 essays containing old and new submissions, and CDs are in the works as well.

But one thing the producers don't want to repeat is the original series' sudden demise.

"This I Believe" had been funded exclusively by Philadelphia advertising executive Ward Wheelock, who helped conceive the program as a tribute to his late wife, who had been interested in ethics and philosophy.

Wheelock made his fortune with lucrative accounts for Campbell's Soup, among other companies, but the loss of the Campbell's contract in late 1954 spelled doom for his riches and the radio show, Gediman said.

When Wheelock, his oldest son and second wife were killed in a yachting accident in the Bermuda Triangle early the next year, Murrow personally financed the essays already in production before ending the series.

Allison and Gediman said raising money to restart the show proved difficult. Scores of foundations turned down their grant requests until the Corporation for Public Broadcasting stepped forward with a \$500,000 offer. Farmer's Insurance agreed to underwrite the project.

As for essays, entries continue to flow in by the hundreds, they said.

Reaching beyond NPR's core listeners, the producers are enlisting the help of newspaper chains such as Gannett and internationally focused British Broadcasting Corp. to raise more interest.

Allison said he has been struck by how seriously people are taking the project, and by the quality of the writing.

"I think everybody approaches the task with a certain level of humility — and they should," Allison said. "Three minutes is a short period of time, so it requires you to distill and discard."

"If you do this exercise right, you come to something that you can truly stand behind, and that's a big task," he said. "That's the great power of the series."

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