

Global Gabfest

Listeners get an earful when they tune in to the *Satellite Sisters'* weekly chats



"People connect," says Liz (right, with Sheila on WNYC's roof), "because we talk about real life."



"We're not experts, we're just sisters," says Liz (in orange, in Manhattan's Central Park with, from left, Sheila, Julie, Lian and Monica).

It was August '96, and the five Dolan sisters were neck deep in—much. Though frantic with family and career commitments, they had cleared their schedules for a sisterly stay at a Calistoga Springs, Calif., motel that featured mud baths. Bonding was beside the point for the quintet, who, though they live in different cities, regularly connect by phone. "My husband had suggested that we enjoyed one another so much, we ought to find a way to *work together*," says Julie. "I said, 'But we can't sing or act.'"

But they sure can chat. So while oozing around that day, they came up with the idea of taking their long distance gabfest to the airwaves. Now, four years later, they have succeeded. *Satellite Sisters*, the Dolans' weekly 60-minute conference call, was launched by Public Radio International last April and has since become one of its top new shows, airing in 19 markets. Blending sisterly substance and silliness, they have tackled such topics as persuading Monica to quit procrastinating and call a roofer; urging Sheila to get a grip on her credit card spending; and talking

Lian—who discovered a lump in her bra—through an on-air self-exam. Their roles fell into place naturally, explains Lian: "Liz does the serious interviews. Julie is the facilitator. I add the color commentary. Monica is the murrer. Sheila is the most offbeat." Since the show's debut, they have been deluged with fan mail. Their favorite note came from a Catholic priest in Chicago, who wrote, "I feel like I'm eavesdropping in the ladies' room."

Actually, it's more like the kitchen of the rambling Fairfield, Conn., house where the sisters shared dishwashing duty. No small task: James Dolan, 72, a retired steel service-center owner, and his wife, Edna, 73, a retired nurse, had eight children; the other three are of the male persuasion (James, 47, Richard, 46, and Brendan, 36). With the radio blaring Sly and the Family Stone, the Dolan girls danced, sang and yakked themselves hoarse while scraping, scrubbing and drying. "It was *loud*," Julie says.

From college on, the sisters went their separate ways. Julie, 45, a former university administrator and the

mother of two teenage sons, eventually followed her energy company executive husband, Tom, to Bangkok. Liz, who is 42, single and living in Portland, Ore., was a vice president of global marketing for Nike until 1997. Sheila, 41, divorced with a teenage daughter, is principal of a Manhattan public elementary school. Monica, 40, is a single nurse, also in Portland. And Lian, 35, is the mother of two boys and lives in Pasadena, Calif., with real estate analyst husband Berick.

Fifteen months after their muddly reunion, at which Liz hatched the *Satellite Sisters* idea, they persuaded Laura Walker, president of WNYC, a New York City public radio station, to back it. "I thought, 'If we could bottle it,'" says Walker, "this is what great radio is all about." The banner seems effortless—but there are some rules. "Dialogue, not diatribe," says Liz. "We wanted to be empathetic, but not touchy-feely or New Agey." And, she adds, "we never use the word 'empowerment.'"

- Christina Cheakalos
- Debbie Seaman in New York City