

# Radio Bingo all about giving back

By Sam Gillett

The Sheer Luck Club wished the Minden Clam Diggers well. The Minden Mommas messaged that they too were ready to play.

According to Paul Vorvis behind the mic, so were “Peter, Pat and her sister Betty.”

Across Ontario and beyond, families, friends and neighbours sat with their bingo cards, tuned in to 100.9, Haliburton’s CanoeFM radio.

It was a Tuesday night, and with the team shout-outs over and done with, Radio Bingo was ready to start at precisely 6 p.m.

“Well good evening and welcome to Radio Bingo.”

Vorvis read the laminated script in front of him, sitting across from Michelle Leigh handling the computer and switchboard and Lillian Hall, next to the soon-to-ring phone lines.

“Proceeds from this session will be shared with CanoeFM and other not-for-profits in Haliburton County.”

With that, Vorvis turns on the bingo ball machine and the game begins.

It’s a tradition that’s ballooned in popularity over the years, particularly during the pandemic. Station manager, Roxanne Casey, said as of April 4 radio bingo had sent more than \$400,000 to 42 community groups across the County.

None of it would be possible without volunteers like Vorvis and committed Bingo players such as Lisa Tompkins.

“I kept hearing about it from all sorts of people who played every week. It sounded like fun,” said Tompkins, former executive director of the Haliburton Highlands Health Services Foundation. “So, we ended up having people visiting and we said, ‘hey, you know what? We should do this.’”

Now she plays every week.

“There’s often a martini involved,” Tompkins said.

At one point, visiting family members requested she send bingo sheets to them in other parts of Ontario.

When someone at Tompkins’ bingo night wins, it’s a big deal.

“You could win \$5 a night and it’s like winning a million,” she said. “It’s lots of fun to win... but it’s really not even about that. It’s more about that experience. It’s a connection to the community.”

## Community winners

Before Vorvis plucks the numbers, martinis are poured and winners are declared, a crew of volunteers spreads out around the County.

They’re led by Bev Bourne and Pat Barry, two volunteers who know the game inside and out.

“It’s a great way to keep busy to keep your head above water and to keep thinking about other things right and it’s a great way to encourage people,” Barry said.

Bourne schedules the drivers who arrive at businesses from Minden to Wilberforce to Eagle Lake with packets of bingo cards.

Barry said it’s become a smoother process over the years, even as more businesses have joined on as bingo sheet vendors. They started with eight and now distribute sheets to 14.

Initially, Barry said bingo was a “hard sell” at CanoeFM. They weren’t sure how people would respond.

“They had to be convinced, but it didn’t take very long,” Barry said.

The game now sells about 650 bingo sheets each week, with the summer months bringing the tally even higher. Some cards are even photographed, with the pictures zooming around North America or even at one time, Australia.

CanoeFM Radio Bingo has gone global.

## Making a difference

Last year, multiple HHSS teens won a fully-funded trip to the Grand River Blues Camp and tickets to the Kitchener Blues Fest through a contest hosted by the Buckslide Blues Society.

Member Rusty Rustenburg said the “generous” donation from CanoeFM helped make that possible.

You can find the traces of Radio Bingo in the financial statements of most community groups or charitable organizations in the County.

“Our board of directors were thrilled to hear that bingo proceeds were being donated to Skyline Dance Studio,” said Stef Wood, a Skyline board member and fundraising lead in an email. “We were incredibly grateful as we had one big ticket item left to finish our dance space – dance mirrors for [two] of the [three] studios. With the CanoeFM



Paul Vorvis reads out the numbers while Michelle Leigh operates the computers. Photo by Sam Gillett.

donation, we had the amount we needed to place the order. We are so very proud to have [three] studios that are fully functional dance spaces because the community we live in has supported us at every turn,” she said.

Those stories are a big reason why bingo players like Tompkins enjoy the game.

“It supports the good work CanoeFM does in the community, and it’s a small way to contribute on a regular basis,” she said. “You get so much back for it just in that experience.”

No matter the weather, rain or shine, hundreds of Highlanders and more will tune in to 100.9 next Tuesday. Vorvis, or another of the more than 20-person crew, will slip on the headphones and the game will begin.

But those volunteers get in on the action too, when time allows. Barry and her neighbours often gather for spaghetti and bingo. She’s won a game or two, too. How did it feel?

“Amazing,” Barry said.



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