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Kiwanis TV Bingo spells help for worthy causes across Niagara

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Televisions across Niagara will be belting out the sounds of Desperate Housewives shenanigans, the cast of CSI solving gruesome crimes or the goings on of the reality show Big Brother Sunday evenings this fall.

But from a steadily increasing number of homes across the region you'll hear a far different sound Sundays: people yelling "bingo!"

That's because for the fourth year running, Kiwanis volunteers will be spending part of their Sunday evenings in a control room at TV Cogeco, and a good chunk of their free time throughout the week organizing the popular Kiwanis TV bingo.

The St. Catharines Kiwanis Club, working with the Welland Kiwanis Club and the Stamford Kiwanis Club in Niagara Falls, launched the fundraising bingo in 2005, based on a highly successful model in existence in Hamilton for more than 30 years.

St. Catharines Kiwanis Club member Jack McKiernan, project manager for the TV bingo, said service clubs have to continually look for innovative, new ways to raise money.

"You always have to keep putting new ones on the board because the old ones are getting stale," he said.

Judging by the number of people taking part in the TV bingo, it's anything but stale. About 5,500 packs of bingo cards -- each holding three cards -- are sold at variety stores in Niagara each week. McKiernan estimates 2,200 people in Niagara tune in to the TV bingo running from 8-9 p.m. Sundays on Cogeco's channel 10.

"It's growing all the time," he said.

Those numbers may swell even faster this year. That's because until now, the cards were only available at stores in St. Catharines, Niagara Falls, Welland, Fonthill, Pelham, Jordan and Vineland. But the card distribution has now been expanded to stores in Thorold, Fort Erie and Port Colborne.

McKiernan has a direct phone line at his home for TV bingo inquires. He said he was receiving complaints from Niagara residents who wanted to play but lived in communities where the cards weren't sold in stores.

"That's what's drawing us into the other communities," he said.

If there was any doubt about how popular the weekly broadcast is, that was dispelled when a vicious winter storm last winter meant the broadcast couldn't go ahead. Cogeco staff said the phones on their switchboard rang off the hooks.

In addition to running the TV bingo show out of Cogeco's broadcast station in Niagara Falls, Kiwanis volunteers spend countless hours each week driving to numerous Avondale stores and other variety stores to drop off special bingo cards that have different serial numbers on them.

When someone thinks they've got a winning card, they call the TV bingo number and a computer program verifies it is a winner.

Each Sunday, winners share in \$2,000 in winnings, and once a month the purse is \$3,000.

Taxi drivers from Central Taxi deliver the winnings to the winners' homes on the night of the games.

McKiernan said it's become common for people to hold bingo parties Sunday nights, with as many as 55 people taking part.

Ironically, the provincewide smoking ban in public places that has dealt a serious blow to traditional bingo halls might have

actually given the TV bingo a boost.

"You can still smoke in your home," said McKiernan.

Along with giving people the thrill of playing bingo from their homes, the Kiwanis TV bingo has a direct benefit on Niagara communities.

The bingo raised about \$200,000 in profits last year, all of which went to numerous worthy causes such as Easter Seals, student scholarships, day care literacy, Women's Place, helping fire victims, helping kids who couldn't otherwise afford to play hockey, to kids' soccer and for seniors projects at long-term care homes.

McKiernan said every cent raised within a specific community remains in that community.

The TV bingo hasn't just helped communities: it's also helped to bring families together.

"I've had people call me to say 'thank you, because my daughter finally comes to see me,' " said McKiernan.

The first TV bingo broadcast of the season is at 8 p.m. Sunday. TV bingo runs until mid-June.

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