

Croft Talks confronts candidates with comedy and creative questions



By Jim Eadie

If people came to the Village Playhouse on Sep. 29 to hear a rip roaring old-fashioned federal election debate between the three main local rivals, it might have been a big letdown, but a pleasant one at that. The first installment of Croft Talks, live conversations with interesting people, featured three of the candidates in the upcoming election: Betty Bannon representing the New Democratic Party, Mike Bossio representing the Liberal Party, and current Member of Parliament Darryl Kramp representing the Conservative Party.

To open the evening, Rev. Lynn Watson spent a few minutes instructing, and having the audience practice applauding and cheering lustily.

Barb Shaw, host for the evening opened the program with a very insightful interview of Bancroft This Week reporter Nate Smelle who shared some of his experiences covering an election in a small rural area.

"I decided to reach out to all of the federal leaders," said Smelle. "I wrote a letter to each of the party leaders. I wanted to put a local face on it.

The results of his efforts surprised him.

"I am an environmentalist, and I expected to hear from Elizabeth May (Green Party leader)," he said. "Even though I sent follow-up messages, I never did get a response."

However, in less than two days, New Democratic Party leader Tom Mulcair contacted him.

"We are a small independent paper, and it is really tough to get interviews like this," said Smelle. "He told me that this was a great idea, and asked when we could do this."

The two met at a school in Toronto after Mulcair had taken questions from children at the school.

"I had a bunch of questions for him but the kids stole most of my questions," said Smelle. "So we had an interesting conversation." Smelle confided the two met in a classroom, sitting in little kid-size chairs.

"After about two weeks Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau emailed me and said he was willing to do one if he was in the area," said Smelle. "He has been to Peterborough and Belleville, but I have not heard yet."

"I noticed that Steven Harper (Conservative Leader) was making a campaign stop in Peterborough, so I just showed up in my best disguise," Smelle said laughing. "I got dressed up, put on a PC button, trimmed my beard and took my old Sun Media card with me."

Smelle determined the side door where press was being checked, and presented himself. After being checked he was allowed into the room with Harper, but soon realized it was full of large media groups all hoping for their moment with the Prime Minister.

What are the issues he has been hearing people talk about on his rounds as a reporter?

Jobs and the economy, poverty, and concerns about the growing rural urban divide. "The big one," he said, "is violence against

women, and an inquiry into the 1100 missing and murdered aboriginal women. I am hearing a lot of anger at Stephen Harper, and all of the polls are showing the same thing; the majority of Canadians want to change the Harper government back to the Government of Canada.?

The candidates were called to the stage, looking nervous and wondering what they had agreed to attend when host Shaw announced with tongue in cheek that no questions had been received from the audience.

?The format tonight will resemble speed dating,? she said. ?What is speed dating? You will have to check out Plenty of Fish.com ? but we hope you (the audience) will get a sense of whom you might want to connect with. Then you might ask for a second date, meet their family, and possibly make your commitment!?

If you could get rid of one province, which one would you choose? Have you ever stolen a pen? We learn that Kramp stole a chocolate bar when he was a little boy, and got caught. Bannon admitted to stealing lots of pens ? and lighters.

During a trivia segment modeled after CBC's The Debaters, the three candidates showed a high level of knowledge on Canadian trivia, but lost a lot of points by not putting their hand up first. In the end Bossio asked permission to just leave his hand up.

In what may seem to be a trivial exercise during an election, the non competitive format revealed quick wit, being a good sport, a good sense of humour, and a glimpse into the relaxed and comfortable version of each of the candidates.

Craig Davidson, and his company Hybla Consulting Corp sponsored the evening program.

Hospice North Hastings who now has the lease to care for and manage the Village Playhouse organized the event.

?We are pleased that Hospice House has taken a long term lease to make sure that this theatre will be here for a long time,? said Rev.Watson.