

Radio Bingo celebrates 10th birthday

By Heather Andrews Miller

For the last 10 years, radio station CFWE has turned Monday and Thursday nights into a social event in many Alberta homes. With transmitters scattered across the province, the station broadcasts bingo games into thousands of houses, many in remote locations where attending the popular and fun game at a bingo hall is impossible. "One of the biggest challenges was getting a network of distributors set up in the communities so listeners could purchase their bingo cards locally," said Carol Russ, director of finance for the Aboriginal Multi-Media Society of Alberta, an established leader in communications in North America and founder of the radio bingo. "But we've got a dedicated number of sellers now. The players are enthusiastic as our prize money gives them a chance to win big money, as much as \$10,000 twice a month, so that makes for some very happy people."

On Oct. 7, 1996 the first game was broadcast with \$2,998 in sales. Prize money amounted to \$2,720, Russ said, but the tiny profit was enough to convince the non-profit company there was potential in the project.

"Since then we have sold more than \$8 million worth of bingo cards and given back to the community \$4.99 million in prizes, with many happy winners," she explained.

With AMMSA's portion of the profits, the number of satellite transmitters has been increased so the station could reach more listeners.

"One of the biggest projects we accomplished was at Moose Hills in the Bonnyville/St. Paul area where we erected a 400-foot tower, with almost half-a-million dollars spent at this one location. Since then, we've also invested considerable funds upgrading existing towers, going from transmitters as small as 10 watts to powerful signals of 100,000 watts, which allowed listeners as far away as 200 kilometres to receive the station." Being able to extend its broadcasting capabilities into every corner of the province allows AMMSA to continue its goal of bringing Aboriginal culture and news to every Albertan and to increase Aboriginal peoples' ability to communicate their concerns and interests with one another and with the non-Native community.

"Our anniversary year will be celebrated by giving away over \$100,000 through October, with 8 Super Bingos producing \$14,000 in winnings. Our listeners are excited at this big news," said Russ.

Players purchase their cards at a local convenience store or gas station and call in their winning numbers to the radio station. "Then they mail the card in and cheques are made out the next day. Sometimes big winners drive into the city to collect in person," said Russ. Playing in the comfort of their own home is what appeals to the thousands of participants, she said.

“They can be totally relaxed, smoke if they want to, have friends or family join them around the kitchen table, and make a fun event out of it.”

Many years ago, Bert Crowfoot, AMMSA’s CEO and general manager, was attending a meeting in Ottawa where another broadcaster, Native Communications Inc. from Manitoba, was relating how the proceeds from its radio bingo were helping the station expand.

“I got the idea to try to duplicate that success here in Alberta,” he said.

“Carol and I worked out the logistics and secured the initial distribution outlets,” he explained. “We had some growing pains at the beginning, but we fine-tuned it to a successful format that was efficient for the station to handle.”

Over the years, the station has listened to feedback from the players, so they’ve been part of the successful evolution of the project. “They love the game and they’ve been faithful about buying their bingo cards.” Goals for the future include a three-year plan for increased distribution.

Anna Giles is the radio bingo co-ordinator and works directly with the vendors who sell the cards and the players who win the prizes.

“These are the people who have made it all possible,” she said. “The 46 sellers who are promoting the cards are great. I go out on the road and try to meet them all over the course of the year. And I try to meet some of the players by being in the store on game day in the different communities when they are coming in to purchase their cards.”

A system has been devised so the sellers don’t have time-consuming duties that might take them away from the operation of their stores. In return, they get free radio advertising as their business is mentioned on air frequently. “It’s a win-win situation,” she said.

Giles said the players tell her that “On bingo nights, family and friends take turns hosting a bingo bash to play in their homes, enjoy a social time and have a good visit.”

Testimonials from listeners are frequent. “They tell us they want us to keep providing the bingo games,” she concluded. “They say it’s convenient, and that they spend less money than they would in a bingo hall. And they look forward to Monday and Thursday nights, when they can enjoy a social activity and inject a little excitement into their week. They’re happy to know that CFWE radio bingo is here to stay.”