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CHYR-CJSP Reunion A 'Big Hit'

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by C. Scott Holland

From their humble beginnings to their heyday to the present, Leamington's radio stations under various call letters have provided important local news, information and music to Essex County and surrounding region for 55 years.

Last Friday night, despite inclement weather, many former and current employees of the radio station and Essex Cable TV, gathered at Ray's Ribhouse for the fourth annual CJSP-CHYR-Essex Cable TV reunion.

As Bill Gay, a former deejay and longtime sales manager, said, "Leamington has the only radio station in North America which has a regular, annual reunion."



CJSP radio personalities, Bill Gay, Wayne McLean and John Mackey reminisce about CJSP's early years at the CHYR/CJSP reunion held Friday at Ray's Ribhouse.

Along with organizer Chuck Reynolds (Paul Bunnett-Jones), the two men beamed with pride at the number of past employees who came to the event.

A total of 37 gathered for the event among which were 12 new faces. The newcomers included Cordell Green (2003-2012), Eugene Barna (1960-79), Jennifer Fernandes ("Sunny the Cactus") (1983-84), Dustyn Janzen (1997-2012), Jim Weir (Y.R. Porter) (1967-69), John Garton Jr. (1965-80) Doris Garton (1967-68), John MacKey (1960-64), Melinda Drake (1975-80), Ron Burgoyne (1957-64), Ted Lovell (1994-98) and Tony DeSantis (1976-79).

The reunion has become immensely popular with some coming from the Toronto area and 12 who cancelled because of poor driving conditions. Former CJSP personality John Mackey even made a side trip to pay a quick visit to Effie Roach who was not in attendance.

The story of Leamington's radio station goes back to February 1955 when it went on-air from the upper floors of the Shotton building.

The trio of Art Gadd, John Garton Sr. and Lou Tomasi were the men who gave Canada's most southernly station its life and direction. Garton was station manager from 1960 to 1980 as well as the voice of the Windsor Bulldogs and was integral part of keeping the station running.

Gadd was the station's first newscaster and eventually became one of the early cable TV pioneers. At one time under him, he had 10 stringers who relayed news stories to him. Also, Gadd eventually held more Rogers cable TV shares than anyone else except Ted Rogers, himself.

Finally, Lou Tomasi was the morning voice from 1955-61 and held the positions of assistant manager and program director. He did teen dances at the Leamington arena which were taped and aired Saturday afternoons. As well, he was responsible for creating the package of Sunday ethnic programming and in later years acquired the rights to broadcast Toronto Blue Jays ball games.

His insistence on highly structured format was a big part of what made CJSP and later CHYR appear equal to major Detroit area stations. Through his instruction and guidance, anyone who worked at the station became a better person and made the station a better part of the radio market. After introductions of reunion members who attended last year,

host and MC Paul Bunnett-Jones gave short bios of the 12 new faces.

One of the earliest members of the CJSP on-air staff was Leamington's own Eugene Barna, whose Ukrainian program aired on Sundays from 1960 until 1979. His diverse career has included being a successful real estate agent and a strong promoter of Scouts Canada. From the newer djs there was Cordell Green and Dustyn Janzen who is the only remaining, working staffer left from pre-2000.

Starting out as a CHYR "Saturday Girl", Melinda Drake spent four years at CHYR as part of its news staff. Her father, the late Peter Drake, was editor and publisher of the Leamington Post for many years and her coverage of the Essex explosion (Feb. 1980) helped the CHYR news team win the RTNDA Charlie Edwards Award in 1980.

From 1967 to 1969 local residents would have been familiar with Y. R. Porter (aka Jim Weir) who was an on-air personality before moving on to Montreal, Toronto, Sarnia and London. He retired in 2009.

Having your dad as station manager may have aided John Garton Jr. in obtaining a job at the station. John began working in 1965 as a Sunday operator and in 1967 helped engineer Ted Cribie lay the wires for the new transmitters which would boost the station's power.

As John recalled, life working for CHYR was adventurous.

"While laying the wires for the transmitters I broke my leg and then during my two week stint as the first all-night dj, accidentally I locked myself out of the station," he said. He still recalls that Lou Tomasi apparently listened to the station 24 hours a day.

Ron Burgoyne is a well-known name in Essex County. He started as a part-time recording operator in 1957, then went to Tillsonburg and Simcoe and came back to CJSP to do the afternoon show in 1963. He left in January 1964 to join the brand new CKWW and CKLW where he remained for the next 36 years before retiring. For a brief three week period in 1994, he was back at CHYR as a newscaster under the incognito name of Ken Ford.

In 1960 John Mackey applied to be a CHYR copy writer. But on his first day he found out he was the chief copy writer. Within a year, he was sports director and did some colour and spot reading on the Sunday Windsor Bulldogs sportscasts. He moved around to different locations until retirement.

Although Wayne McLean was at the 2011 reunion, he told how he got started in radio. "I was 11 years old when I saw my first radio studio and when I was 15 I knew I had to become a dj. I auditioned at a Windsor station but was not hired. I was told to work on my pronunciation. Mostly classical artists like Chopin, Mozart, etc.. A friend procured a 40 watt transmitter which was put in the basement of my parents' house and we ran it up to an aerial on the roof. I had record players and tapes in my bedroom and soon I had my own pirate station. I could even find myself the clearest frequencies to broadcast on. My broadcasts could be received within a straight line for a few miles," he said.

His AM 850 shows led to some stints broadcasting from the roof an A & W using his portable system. "They could be picked up about five miles away," he boasted.

The night provided many unusual stories and incidents that occurred over the years including John Mackey and Bill Gay who laughed about an on-air gaff made by John Garton Sr.. As the numbers and memories have grown, organizer Paul Bunnett-Jones is considering next year's already and looks for an April or May get-together. Until then as Lou Tomasi would sign off, "Orchids to you!"