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Lower Mainland communities OWN up to reality TV glare

By MARSHA LEDERMAN
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Two Lower Mainland communities - one in transition; one hoping to be - take their struggles to the reality TV airwaves this month. Both are essentially social experiments, one organic and the other made-for-TV.

Gastown Gamble documents the beginnings of an upstart diner/heritage butcher shop operation with a rich history in the Downtown Eastside. *Million Dollar Neighbourhood* takes viewers out to Aldergrove, where community members try to boost their collective net worth by \$1-million.

Both premiere on OWN (Canada) this month. The Corus Entertainment-run Canadian version of Oprah Winfrey's TV network has six Canadian shows on the air or in the works - all of them from B.C.

"The fact that that happened is a coincidence," says Vibika Bianchi, a vice-president at Corus Entertainment. "But there's a very strong production community there."

And in *Save-on-Meats*, there was a very strong story, the network felt. The butcher shop, which opened in 1957, was a Vancouver institution, but neither nostalgia nor an iconic neon pig sign could save the place, which closed in 2009. Local restaurateur Mark Brand felt he could - and give the troubled neighbourhood a boost in the process. Last year, he reopened the butcher shop, adding a diner next door.

"It's not a social enterprise; it's an enterprise that's trying to be social," says Mr. Brand, who also owns upscale restaurant Boneta, hipster clothing company Sharks & Hammers and a number of other Gastown-based enterprises. "I want to believe that a business model like this can succeed."

Vancouver-based production company Lark Productions (*The Real Housewives of Vancouver*) and Mr. Brand agreed there would be enough drama to sustain a docu-reality series. "There's no shortage of problems here," he says.

In next week's first episode, there is tension over whether the restaurant can pass its inspection as it's about to open (what Mr. Brand apparently has to do to activate the smoke detector does make you wonder). In the second episode, the butcher shop experiences an identity crisis that serves as a metaphor for the neighbourhood.

Whether a struggle between filet mignon and pork sausage can lure viewers remains to be seen, but Ms. Bianchi seems optimistic. "There's definitely a curiosity about it: Can you be successful and be socially responsible at the same time?"

Meanwhile, out in suburbia, *Million Dollar Neighbourhood* is touting fiscal responsibility, with a monetary twist on Force Four Entertainment's *Village on a Diet* concept. Instead of shedding pounds, 100 households have 10 weeks to increase their collective net worth by \$1-million, requiring each to save or earn an additional \$1,000 a week.

Cue the garage sales, debt counselling, and cash-only living, led by co-host/financial expert Bruce Sellery. "Ninety per cent of our life goals have a price tag attached," says Mr. Sellery, whose book *Moolala* helped financially re-educate the participants.

Force Four executive producer John Ritchie says the Aldergrove community was extremely game (it was one of three in the running for the series) and citizens lined up to participate, despite the obvious difficulties in disclosing one's finances.

"It's like they're standing there naked in public," Mr. Ritchie says. "It's a pretty brave thing to do."

Did they make it? Viewers will have to wade through 10 weeks of cost-cutting to find out. But some success has already come to the *Million Dollar Neighbourhood*. A sale south of the border will be announced shortly. (OWN in the United States also broadcasts *Anna & Kristina's Grocery Bag*.)

Force Four will also shop the series format at the Cannes television showcase MIPTV in April.

After all, says Mr. Ritchie, it's a universal issue. "Everything is connected to money: our health, our outlook on the world, our ability to do things and have fun."

Gastown Gamble premieres Jan. 18 and *Million Dollar Neighbourhood* Jan. 22 on OWN (Canada).

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