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Listen Up TV goes independent

Show uses news and current affairs "as a bridge to discover Christ"

BURLINGTON, ON—The first thing visitors might notice about the new offices of Listen Up TV on the second floor of the Crossroads centre in Burlington, Ontario is the walls. They're grey—a soft but institutional shade just begging for some colour—and they're completely bare; like blank slates awaiting their story.

If this story were a poem, the naked walls would symbolize the unknown future of Lorna Dueck's brand new ministry, "Media Voice Generation/Listen Up TV;" a ministry whose story has yet to be written. But this is not a poem, and in reality the walls are merely a reflection of the fact that Dueck and the Listen Up production team have only recently moved in to the premises, and have been far too preoccupied with more urgent matters to do something so mundane as hanging pictures.

For example, during a Monday morning meeting, the six-person production team worked their way through a 12-item agenda discussing such issues as the positioning of the names superimposed across the bottom of the screen ways to increase and encourage viewer feedback and how best to respond to a time slot offer from Vision TV.

Just over two months ago, Dueck, president of Media Voice Generation, (a charitable organization incorporated this summer), and her team took up residence in the leased space from smaller offices one floor up. Producer Susan Ponting, associate producer Melinda Estabrooks, director of media Tore Stautland and director/editor Darren Kaulback join Dueck (executive producer) around the table for three hours of lively problem solving related to the weekly, half-hour current affairs show.

Bringing the show to air may be a team effort, but there's no doubt that "Listen Up" has always been Dueck's baby.

"It was just an extension of who I was as a Christian journal list, when I arrived at '100 Huntley Street,'" she says in an interview later that day. "I was always bringing a news perspective, and so within two years of being on the Huntley Street program, David [Mainse] said, 'why don't you craft this into a feature on our show?' And he gave me a weekly half hour to bring 'Listen Up'."



Executive producer and "Listen Up" host Lorna Dueck and director/editor Darren Kaulback go over show particulars at a production meeting. Formerly under the umbrella of Crossroads Christian Communications, Listen Up TV went independent in September.

Like a parent, she has passionate hopes for this "baby," believing in its potential to grow into a powerful tool for evangelism by bringing Christian truth to secular culture.

Listen Up continued on page 2

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October 15, 2004



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Listen Up continued from page 1

A promotional video on the "Listen Up" website, (www.listenuptv.com), points out that television is considered to be the most authoritative, influential and believable media in this country, and that the most popular Canadian shows are news and public affairs shows. The same video claims that "Listen Up" presents, "God's view on news and current affairs."

"Our whole mission," says Dueck, "is news and current affairs as a bridge to discover Christ."

A substantial challenge

It is a young, hip-looking group gathered around the "Listen Up" table; an all-new team to go with the new ministry. It is also a group to which Dueck has clearly spelled out her expectations. "I've had to say, 'spiritual formation is part of your job responsibilities. Because you will not survive in public messaging—our goal is one million secular Canadian [viewers] a month—you will not survive in it unless you have great spiritual roots going deep.'"

They'll need such roots, for the challenge ahead is a substantial one. "Listen Up" has been flying solo since September 1 after eight years of being produced under the umbrella of Crossroads Christian Communications Inc.

"We need to raise a million dollars this year," says Dueck disclosing her budget for the current television season. "It's a mountain of a challenge. We're going day by day."

But the challenge is more than just a financial one. On this day, the meeting is joined mid-morning by Crossroads Television System (CTS) production manager Terry Maskell. Maskell has been invited in to help sort out expectations for the new working relationship with CTS. "'Listen Up' is now an external client of CTS," says Maskell, explaining that from now on, the relationship will be a supplier/client one.

The issue of studio cancellations comes up first. There were 19 such cancellations last year. "You're entitled to cancel with appropriate notice," says Maskell, explaining that appropriate notice is not less than 24 hours.

The discussion moves on to the subject of closed captioning for the hearing impaired; a process that is necessary, but one that is also creating technical and financial headaches for the team.

Later, Maskell explains that the "Listen Up" crew are facing a learning curve. "There's been a kind of safety net there with Crossroads," he says. "Now...being on their own...they're going to learn about things that they didn't really have to deal with before; like closed captioning, and that there's a real cost associated with what they do. Because [when they were] with Crossroads, for example, they didn't have to pay for facilities, whereas now they have to cover all of those costs themselves.

"So I think that's going to be the challenge; getting past the first year and learning about things that they didn't have to deal with before."

The technical and financial challenges seem to be only the beginning. "We've had to figure out how to make a donor base, how to make a database, how to have an office, how to buy computers, how to get furniture,

how to put governance around ourselves, how to make a board, how to stay public and aggressive about moving forward, how to get great staff," says Dueck.

When asked why it was necessary for "Listen Up" to leave the Crossroads family of ministries, David Mainse is diplomatic. "We've had a number of ministries that have been birthed from Crossroads Christian Communications," he says.

"When a ministry like "Listen Up" comes under Crossroads, it's very important of course, but it can restrict its growth somewhat, because we're doing a lot of things under one corporation; one board.

"I'm a great believer in a whole lot of initiatives and a whole lot of ministries rather than one great big humongous ministry," he adds.

Long process

Dueck has been fundraising to cover production costs since the program's inception.

"We've eased the burden of Lorna's fundraising onto her slowly," says Mainse, "We have helped Lorna financially little by little, so that she could have time to develop her own supporters."

Develop supporters she has. The new ministry's board of directors includes Preston and Sandra Manning, Eleanor Clitheroe, (former president and CEO of Ontario's Hydro One) and Franklin Pyles (president of the Christian and Missionary Alliance in Canada).

Like a proud grandparent, Mainse is appreciative. "I don't think a stronger board of directors has ever been assembled in Canada," he enthuses. "The people she has on that board are absolutely amazing.

"Anybody else but Lorna might not be strong enough to work with a board that strong. But Lorna is a very strong person. I saw her grow through the years. And so we're just so proud of her," he says.

But just as in families, it's often the grandparents who really relish the delight of watching baby grow, while mom and dad cope with all of the worries inherent in raising up the little one, Dueck herself is more sombre. She worries that she'll "waste the airwaves," and that she'll "overstress" worrying about the money.

"I've learned a lot about the uncomfortable side of leadership in the last few years," she says. "Sometimes God lays something on your plate and it needs to be carried forward.

"I'm just walking in obedience [through] the doors God is opening. At times; reluctantly. Bottom line; I do feel this is the work of God. And I'm tremendously honoured that I've been called to it. But it's hard."

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