

Mercer makes a difference for kids

By Kristin Froneman - Vernon Morning Star

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George Galbraith (left) has some fun with Canadian television celebrity Rick Mercer while presenting a \$100,000 donation to the Rebuilding Hurlburt campaign after a fantastic performance at the Vernon and District Performing Arts Centre Tuesday night.

Cory Bialecki/Morning Star

Whether he's rubbing noses with polar bears, or skinny dipping with politicians, every day must seem like summer camp for comedian Rick Mercer.

So it was apt that the Canadian TV personality was in town Tuesday in a benefit for the Rebuilding Hurlburt campaign to overhaul the popular children's camp on Okanagan Lake.

Mercer regaled the full house at the Vernon Performing Arts Centre with stories of talking to Americans, ambushing politicians and meeting everyday Canadians, and then kept talking after the show as he attended a meet and greet with those audience members who paid \$200 for the honour.

"He's very amusing," said 92-year-old Ruth Stewart, who was seen walking arm-in-arm with Mercer as an honoured guest at the event, and shared a few memories of her own about the now 75-year-old camp once owned by her parents, Ase and Pamela Hurlburt.

"I was camping out on the property one year, when I was stopped as I was about to enter the tent," she said. "The other campers thought I was a boy. It was an all-girls camp at the time. I told them to go and ask my mother, that I was, in fact, a girl."

Stewart's family purchased the 2.5 acres of property on Okanagan Lake in 1933 to create a camp for North Okanagan children, and sold the land in 1939 to Trinity United Church, which still owns and operates the camp for children and youth of all faiths and backgrounds.

"My father founded the property, then the church did buy it out, but it was always intended for a camp," said Stewart, who donated \$1,000 to the campaign, which hopes to raise more than \$3 million to completely re-build the existing camp.

"My parents would be happy with the rebuild, and I am happy with helping them raise the money."

Another former camper at the Mercer meet and greet, George Galbraith, donated \$100,000 to the campaign in honour of his mother Lillian, who was the secretary-treasurer, and a Girl Friday, at the camp for more than 30 years.

“My mom felt it was an opportunity for people to go to the lake that didn’t have a chance to go. Children from as far as Penticton to Revelstoke would go to Hurlburt. She would pick them up at the train station, then they would then get bused to the camp,” said Galbraith, who remembers running errands with his mother in town to pick up provisions for the camp.

“The cook would have the weekends off, so she would cook for them. There was no fridge back then so we would go to the ice plant by Civic Arena, and get dry goods from Archie Fleming’s and visit Frank King’s bakery.

“My mom was so involved with Hurlburt when they said they were in need of money, I decided to set it up as a memorial for my mom (who passed away in ‘94).”

Galbraith, along with almost everyone else in the room, got the chance to speak to Mercer, and said he was impressed with his show.

“He is one of our genuine, understated Canadians. He’s been so generous with his time. There are no airs about him.”

Hurlburt liaison with the community campaign Loretta Bell-Hardy said she was thrilled with the response from the community at the show.

“The event was great for a good time, good for getting the message out there about our campaign,” she said. “The two contributions from George Galbraith and Ruth Stewart speak to the nostalgia and the history of the first 75 years and the commitment to towards the next 75 years. It’s all about continuing to benefit children and youth of the North Okanagan.”