

Pillitteri hoping to pull off a 'comedy coup' for CBC

Fruit Farm looks for votes in CBC comedy contest

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NIAGARA-ON-THE-LAKE — Joe Pillitteri is used to making people laugh.

For more than a decade now, he's been gracing stages across Niagara, and beyond, to tell jokes. He's acted as emcee, he's headlined his own shows and he's appeared as an opener for others. Now he's hoping to take his talent to the next level by bringing it to television for a half-hour CBC prime time special.

Pillitteri, along with a group of other local talent including Ryan Gaio, Vickie Fagan and Joel Goldberg, is in the final stages of Canadian Broadcast Company's ComedyCoup, an online contest that gives audiences the chance to vote for comedy show concepts.

"I've long thought about turning my comedy shows into a television show," said Pillitteri, adding he was encouraged to enter the contest by family and friends. "In a way, my shows have been a testing ground for material over the years. In the process, they've raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for the community."

While he's long entertained the idea of writing a screenplay, entering the contest forced him to get on with it. In fact, following week three of the contest, he had to do just that - write a 30-minute pilot episode.

"I was finally able to just sit down and do it, because I had to," he said.

Pillitteri teamed up with Fagan, a videographer who had previously offered her services for a charity comedy show he did earlier this year, who put him in contact with her producer friend in Toronto, Goldberg. Gaio reached out and offered his services in helping Pillitteri write

his screenplay.

"Everyone just sort of came together, it's been great," he said, adding they have a strong team.

Starting with 300 entries in the contest, the field has been whittled down to the top 55 and Pillitteri said they're in the final push now to make it to the top 15. In order to make it, they need votes, comments and reviews online.

"The support so far has been amazing," he said. In order to vote, people have to register on the ComedyCoup website and log in to have their votes count. He said he's been getting messages from family members and friends in the community who have been doing just that. Simpsons Pharmacy helped the cause by promoting the contest on their sign out front, and Pillitteri said support like that means a lot to him.

"That's why I love living in this community," he said. "Everyone is just so supportive. There's no competitiveness or ill will here, everyone is just working to help you succeed. You can't get that anywhere else."

Anyone who has seen Pillitteri's comedy routine over the years will recognize some of the material in his ComedyCoup pitch, Farm Fresh. The comedy is based on his days as a young boy working on his father's farm. As an Italian immigrant with a strong work ethic, Pillitteri admits working for his father wasn't always the most pleasant — there were long days spent working on the family farm. While it meant sacrificing time spent hanging out with friends and chasing girls, he did get to meet a variety of people from around the world who, despite language barriers, all shared one thing in common with him: they all hated working on his father's farm.

"We really bonded over that," he said with a laugh.

Between his father, and his Scottish mother who always felt her son was working too much, Pillitteri said he has a lot of material to work from. While his parents and two sisters play a prominent role in his routines and show pitch, he said

they're all very supportive.

"My sisters will watch a clip and say 'that's it! That's exactly what it was like,' because I really try to capture the feeling of what it was like back then," he said.

His parents are just happy to see him pursue something he feels is truly worth exploring, although Pillitteri admits his mother still worries that he's working too much. In addition to his comedy career, Pillitteri owns and operates Lakeview Vineyard Equipment on Lakeshore Road.

From the top 15, judges will go through the final entries and at least five projects will be optioned for development. The field will be narrowed down to the final five, who will travel to a live event in Toronto and pitch their projects before a panel of industry pros and the ComedyCoup "uberfan".

Pillitteri said it's not just votes that are considered, but reviews and comments surrounding the entries as well.

The winning entry will be greenlit for production and receive \$500,000 in production financing to create a half-hour special for CBC prime time.

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The 10-week long contest kicked off on Oct. 2 and features video from comedy creators across the country.

To check out Farm Fresh and to cast a vote, visit www.comedycoup.cbc.ca/fruit-farm.

Joe Pillitteri is hoping to win ComedyCoup.

