

TV PREVIEW: 'Contest crack' keeps people chasing dream prizes

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TV Preview

Winning For A Living

Tonight at 9

CBC

You can't win it if you're not in it -- that's the rhythmically pithy bit of folk wisdom that drives many people to purchase an occasional lottery ticket or take the time to fill out the odd grocery-store contest form.

But for a certain class of prize-hungry Canadians, really having a chance to win it -- whatever "it" happens to be -- means really, REALLY being in it.

For them, for the "contesters" among us, winning becomes an all-consuming passion that's capable of turning ballots and bar codes, proofs of purchase and mail-in coupons, sweepstakes and superstitions into an obsessive pursuit that rules every moment of their day-to-day lives.

The new documentary *Winning For a Living*, which airs tonight at 9 on CBC's Doc Zone, offers a fascinating and slightly disturbing look inside the lives of some way-beyond-committed contestants, assessing the motives and analyzing the strategies that drive their compulsive desire to keep getting something for nothing.

The film, by Montreal-based Handel Productions, walks the fine line between admiration and disdain for the contestants' overzealous behaviour -- at times, co-writer/director Nadine Pequenezza seems in awe of the way the prize-hunters' efforts actually produce results; at other times, she strips away the giddy-fun veneer and offers a glimpse of the toll that this obsession takes on the contestants' lives and the lives of those around them.

Self-anointed "Contest Queen" Carolyn Wilman of Oshawa, Ont., is seen strolling the streets of her neighbourhood, young daughter in tow, rummaging through other people's recycling bins in order to collect screw tops from Pepsi bottles so she can enter number codes in an online contest.

She describes herself as an addict to "contest crack -- one win and you're hooked."

Similarly dependent on the free-stuff buzz is Toronto resident Mike Smith, who figures his 30-year obsession with contesting has produced more than \$250,000 in prize wins, including trips, cars, to no less than seven TV sets.

He has contest-entering down to a science, driving from one ballot-box location to the next and filling out forms at every red light along the way. He's full of enthusiasm as he recites his list of prizes won, but it's a different story when Pequenezza turns her camera on Smith's wife, who tearfully describes a life in which marriage and family have been an afterthought to a man obsessed with winning contests. It's just plain sad, really.

Newmarket, Ont., single mother Rosemary Chui says she has relied on contest wins to help her provide for her three sons -- a \$2,500 grocery prize once saved her from homelessness, and she estimates she wins \$1,000 a month in merchandise to supplement her meagre income.

Her current goal: to win a free car for her oldest son, whose past-its-prime beater could break down at any moment.

In the end, Winning For a Living leaves it up to the viewer to decide whether the fringe dwellers who call themselves testers are just a more determined brand of starry-eyed dreamers, or if something a little bit darker drives them.

Feel free to enter as many opinions as you like.

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