

Improv Troupe to Headline Prairie Talks

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A Minneapolis, Minn.-based improv troupe is set to put the "fun" in the ethics of campaign funding and lobbying at the next Prairie Talks event in Rugby.

The Theater of Public Policy will speak Sunday, Sept. 13, at 3:30 p.m. at the Prairie Village Museum. The show will start with a discussion panel that includes Paul E. Sum, professor and chair of the Department of Political Science & Public Administration at the University of North Dakota; Chad Litton, professor and chair of the Human and Social Science Department at the University of Mary; and Nathan Steffen, assistance professor of political science at Bismarck State College. A four-person cast - which comes from troupe members Tane Danger, Brandon Boat, Andrew Haaheim, Kelly Kohlbacher, Eric Simons, Logan Martin, Jim Robinson, Maggie Sotos, Kenza Hadj-Moussa, Josh Will, Carmen O'Halloran, Dennis Curley and Damian Johnson - will then improvise scenes based on the topic discussed. In the second half, panelists will take questions from the audience, and the troupe will conduct a final series based on the events of the program. Friends of the Museum will also serve beer, wine and popcorn, in addition to coffee and sweets, before and after the event, and the public is welcome to attend at no cost.

"We do our best to work around other great events in the community so we're building on each other's success, not competing for attendance," Prairie Talks director and founder Kristi Rendahl said. "Some of the topics might sound a little intimidating if you haven't spent much time thinking about them, but it's really just a casual presentation and conversation."

Article Photos



The Theater of Public Policy, a Minneapolis-based improv ...

According to a press release, the Minneapolis Star Tribune once compared the troupe to "C-SPAN being suddenly swarmed by the cast of Saturday Night Live". A 2013 Forbes article said the troupe was dubbed "the Gen Y answer to [former "The Daily Show" host Jon] Stewart and [Stephen] Colbert" by local press.

Danger and Boat, longtime friends and alums of Gustavus Adolphus College, started the troupe in 2011 and have since discussed an array of topics on public policy. The former did improv since his freshman year of college, and helmed his campus newspaper and interned on a congressional campaign. The latter did improv since middle school, and did advocacy work during college.

Rendahl learned of the troupe when she was a panelist - along with an accountant and the head of a charity watchdog agency - at an event they performed at last fall for the Minnesota International NGO Board on the topic of nonprofit overhead.

Prairie Talks started in 2012 with two speakers: Alan Bjerga, author and journalist, in June and Roxana Saberi, journalist/speaker/human rights advocate, in October. Since then, the series has done two events per year, with "No Place Called Home" (a performance by Kim Schultz and Amikaelya Gaston) and Bjorn Engesland, secretary general of the Norwegian Helsinki Committee in 2013; "Prairie Silence" author Melanie Hoffert and Marty Young Bear, rancher and Three Affiliated Tribes member, and "Black Gold Boom" producer Todd Melby last year; and Merrill Piepkorn and Lorraine Davis shared how stories shape individuals, communities and society in June.

"I started it in 2012 because I knew there was an appetite for this kind of thing in Rugby and the area," Rendahl said.

Rendahl, a native of Benson County, recalls that from 1997 to 2002, when she lived in Armenia, she would be hounded with speaking requests every time she returned home to visit.

"Since then, I've had the good fortune of meeting all kinds of people through my work and travels, and Prairie Talks is a nice way to connect the dots between where I'm from and what I do now," Rendahl said.

According to Rendahl, when deciding speakers, the organization looks for topics that range from local to international issues.

"North Dakotans are naturally more invested in what happens in communities in their backyard, but there's no reason their voices shouldn't be heard on issues of national and international importance as well."

After a speaker is found, the organization asks if he or she would like to speak at a future event and then figures out how to pay for the event. The N.D. Humanities Council has supported events since Prairie Talks' inception, and free-will offerings from the community have helped defray expenses.

Since the series started, Rendahl said the response from the community has been "overwhelmingly positive".

"We've had as many as 120 people in the room, and there is plenty of positive feedback in the evaluation forms," Rendahl said. "Audience members aren't shy about asking questions, and they always linger after the event to talk with speakers and each other. That's the whole point, really."

Events have been co-sponsored by the Sons of Norway Odin Lodge, the Heart of America Library, the Prairie Village Museum and the Bethany Lutheran Church WELCA, and volunteers have come from those organizations as well as from the area.

The organization has an advisory council that consists of area residents Charles Repnow, Lisa Volk, Jim Teigen, Danielle Skjelver and Deb Mack, as well as Jennifer Levreault, a designer at VSA Partners; and Kate Proctor, manager of student information for the Noble Network of Charter Schools.