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Saturday, June 28, 2008

Amateur radio operators meet to catch a wave

Jessica Nunez / The Detroit News

LIVONIA -- Fingers flew, voices crackled and the beeps of Morse code resounded behind a fire station on Plymouth Road as ham radio operators made contact with people all over the United States and Canada Saturday during their annual field day competition.

Ham, or amateur, radio operators communicate via radio waves and are called amateurs not because of skill level, but to signify that they don't make money off the operations.

The Livonia Amateur Radio Club and the Ford Amateur Radio League have met at the site for the past four years on the last weekend in June to participate in the event.

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About 20 people were at the site on Saturday afternoon, and organizers expected just as many to show up to take over for the night shift. The field day is officially a contest, and each station logs the contacts they make to be counted at the end of the 24-hour period.

"We're not really pushy about it," said Fred Deschenes of Livonia. "We try to make this a social event and a learning experience for people for emergency situations.

"We did come in third in our class in Michigan though last year," he added.

Amateurs communicate via code, voice and even typing on a keyboard, through a recently developed digital mode. They must be licensed by the federal government, which allows them the freedom to broadcast over any frequency within their band wave, unlike CB radio or walkie-talkie operators, who are restricted to specific channels.

"It's been proven to be an extremely good form of communication during an emergency," said Bill Boyke of Dearborn, who got his license in 1991 with his wife. "During 9/11, when all the cell phones were jammed, amateurs were the ones keeping track of all the rescue workers."

Boyke feels strongly about bringing a younger generation into the hobby, and pushes his three adolescent daughters and other kids in the neighborhood to try it out and get licensed.

He was successful with his 14-year-old daughter Katie. He proudly displays her call sign, a combination of letters and numbers that serves as identification in the radio world, on the license plate of one of the family cars.

"And Katie is part owner of that car," he said. "It would be illegal to use it as a license plate number unless she's on the title."

According to Katie, owning a car before she can drive it is one of the best perks. She is a rare breed of amateur operator, not only because she's young, but also because she's female in a hobby that has always been male-dominated.

"Women are very popular on the radio," Boyke said. "Katie was one of the ones with the most contacts last year."

And it's not only because she was a novelty.

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"The pitch of a female voice transmits better over radio," Katie said. "We sound clearer."

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