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Whatever floats their boats

Anything goes at Fox Valley United Way boat event

BY ANNALISA RODRIGUEZ

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A giant caterpillar. A banana. A paper hat. The Titanic. An exact replica of the airplane that crash-landed in the Hudson River. And an old Volkswagen bus with hippies inside and smoke coming out of the back that hints to mechanical problems.

These have all been seen in the past on Mastodon Lake in Phillips Park in Aurora as part of Fox Valley United Way's annual What Floats Your Cardboard Boat Race.

The race celebrates its 10th anniversary on Saturday. Judging for some categories begins at 10 a.m., the first race sets sail at 10:30 a.m. and awards and trophies will be handed out at noon.

Organizers expect an all-time high of 22 boats to participate and roughly 500 people to come to the event.

Boats race in categories of human-powered or mechanical, meaning that racers can use either oars or a mechanism to propel the boat, usually a bicycle pedal.

Judging categories include Best in Race for those two categories, a People's Choice Award, Judges' Choice Award and Team Spirit Award.

A special award goes to the craft and crew that manages the Most Spectacular Sinking.

"Sometimes people build boats just to win that," Director of Administration Deborah Collins said.

Boats must be constructed solely out of cardboard pieces taped together then painted to create a waterproof shell.

"Duct tape and varnish are your boat's best friends," Collins said. "Building the boat is half the fun, and then



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Judging categories in Fox Valley United Way's What Floats Your Cardboard Boat Race include Best in Race, a People's Choice Award, Judges' Choice Award, Team Spirit Award and Most Spectacular Sinking. "Sometimes people build boats just to win that," Director of Administration Deborah Collins said of the sinking award.

when you go and race it, it's complete."

But the race is about more than witty boat names and flashy designs — its main purpose is to create awareness for Fox Valley United Way's efforts to raise funds for the 54 health and human-services agencies in southern Kane County and Kendall County that the organization supports.

"It's what we call our campaign kickoff event," Collins said. "It's a community event that celebrates the beginning of Fox Valley United Way's annual fundraising campaign."

And Collins calls that celebration more of a fundraiser than a fundraiser — at the boat race, all of the entities that make Fox Valley United Way what it is come together: donors and sponsors, the agencies that receive its funds and community members who use those agencies' services.

"I think it's so important to see how everybody can come together and make a difference in the community," Collins

said. "I think it's a great opportunity for the community to understand the importance of getting involved and caring about the social services agencies that care about the people in the community."

The race can serve as an opportunity for those involved with the agencies to come together and build relationships.

"It's a wonderful team-building exercise because it's outside of the norm of something you'd do as a community project," Collins said.

And that's one of the things Aurora's Hased House enjoys the most about participating — the organization has raced for the past five years and tries to get as many people involved as possible, including residents of the facility, staff and even family of staff.

This year, the organization's theme will be "Hesed Big Top," a circus theme that will include having eight people on the boat and 20 others dressed up.

"It's a way for everybody to interact and see each other in a nonwork setting," said Executive Director Ryan Dowd. "It's

If you go

What: Fox Valley United Way's What Floats Your Cardboard Boat Race

When: Races begin at 10:30 a.m. Saturday; judging starts at 10 a.m.

Where: Mastodon Lake in Phillips Park, Smith Boulevard at Ray Moses Drive, Aurora

Cost: Free

Info: uwfoxvalley.org

not all work and serious."

Hesed House is the second-largest homeless shelter in Illinois that provides transitional and subsidized housing, counseling, job training and other services.

The funding the agency receives from Fox Valley United Way is essential to its ability to function, Dowd said.

"It's one of the few fundraisers where there's quite a bit of flexibility in how we use those funds," Dowd said, "which is so important for running a nonprofit organization, especially in these lean times."