

Radio Free Vienna

Ham radio group hosts annual Field Day.

By Reyhaneh Fathieh

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The need for communication is perhaps most dire in the event of an emergency or a natural disaster. Operating independently from the public infrastructure, amateur, or "ham," radio enables the two-way transfer of urgent, life-saving messages when cell phones and computers fail.

"The Metro-area has one of the highest densities of ham radio operators, next to New York," said Tom Azlin, Vienna Wireless Society president. Established in 1963, the club has 140 members, ranging in age from 10 to 75.

Ham radio operators use battery or gas generator power and portable antennas for worldwide communication. Amateur radio clubs help ham enthusiasts get started and stay involved in the technical hobby.

In addition to assisting members in receiving an amateur-radio license from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the Vienna Wireless Society attends and hosts many ham activities. Beginning Saturday, June 25, at 2 p.m., the club conducted its annual, 24-hour Field Day event, at Burke Lake Park. The conclusion to Amateur Radio Week, Field Day is sponsored by the American Radio Relay League and has been occurring nationally for decades.

"The Field Day operation is an emergency preparedness exercise, and a public demonstration of amateur radio," said Pete Norloff, Vienna Wireless Society treasurer. "We take all equipment out on the field, running on emergency power."

The club set up eight tent-shaded stations in the park, interspersed among the trees and surrounded by tall antennas, moving satellites and 250-foot wires.

Installation requires tree climbing and precision, and can take anywhere from six to 24 hours. When settled, the operators communicated with hams as far away as Israel, using voice, Morse code and typed text. Every licensed ham has his/her own call sign, similar to a telephone number or an on-line screen name, which he/she uses as both a nickname and a contact code.

Amateur radio has its own frequency, and radio signals bounce off the ionosphere from point to point, connecting person to person. A record-breaking 775 contacts were made from a single tent during this year's hot and sunny Field Day.

ABOUT 100 VISITORS, including Boy and Girl Scouts and Thomas Jefferson High School students, witnessed the Field Day set-up, toured the site and were also given the opportunity to get on the air and make their own contacts. "We used to get strange stares, but since 9-11, awareness of emergencies has helped the public recognize the importance of ham radio," Azlin said. "It's not just a hobby, it's a service." Amateur radio operators provide emergency communications for the Red Cross, Salvation Army, FEMA, and other state and local agencies, without accepting any compensation for their work. "We were involved with supporting the Red Cross during Hurricane Isabel, as well as providing short-range communication during the Pentagon attacks, and helping with the Tsunami relief efforts in Indonesia," said Norloff.



Photo by Reyhaneh Fathieh
Vienna Wireless Society members Ben Gelb and Dan Sullivan transmit voice signals and make radio connections in one of the eight stations available for Field Day, on Sunday, June 26.



The purpose of amateur radio clubs is not only to provide emergency communication. Meeting twice a month, the Vienna Wireless Society conducts fund raisers and participates in ham radio contests. Field Day is both a public demonstration and an overnight camp. Trailers, tents, good company and an on-site chef ensure the highest level of comfort for the group.

Club involvement is also simple, as Ben Gelb, Vienna Wireless Society member and electrical engineering and computer science double major at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, recalled.

"My mom took me to a meeting when I was in third-grade," he said. "I got a book out of the library and that's pretty much all it took to get a license. I don't remember it being very hard." Investing as little money and time as they choose for ham radio, members can simultaneously help the community and achieve personal goals.

"The coolest person I talked to was probably a cosmonaut," Gelb said.