

Calendar

Save the Hams

Amateur Radio Touches Sky

Mike Lebo, a ham-radio operator since he was in high school, is a lone wolf. That's an alien concept in the ham-radio world, where making contacts is the whole point. Still, while most of Lebo's buddies are competing in the annual Field Day contest this weekend, he will be found in a clearing near Montgomery Field, willing to let anyone try his equipment.

As a do-gooder, the 57-year-old Lebo has an ulterior motive. When asked how many hams Lebo would estimate are living in the San Diego

area, he says, "Okay, this is the problem, and it's a very serious problem. The

death rate for ham-radio operators far exceeds the new-member rate."

On Field Day, hams nationwide practice their emergency communication skills by taking their home stations and setting them up outside. To measure their abilities, they compete to make as many contacts as possible in a 24-hour period. A secondary goal of Field Day is to introduce the hobby to newbies. But the contest gets in the way of that recruitment effort, says Lebo.

"The problem with having all these clubs in the contest mode is that, in order to win, they'll go to remote locations, like high up in the mountains, where you can get better communications." (The Amateur Radio Club of El Cajon, for example, is setting up its station in the Laguna Mountains.) "But the public doesn't want to drive all the way up to Mount Laguna to try ham radio. So I decided that I wanted to have a site in town."

He did not offer this opportunity last year and won't again next year. "This is a one-time deal," he says. That's because he hasn't had many people volunteer to help him. "One [volunteer] had to drop out because of ill health — he's old. Worst-case scenario: hundreds of people show up and there's just me."

In an emergency, amateur radio is one of the primary means of communication. "Take, for example, the fires," says Lebo. "Everybody was hodgepoding it," meaning people were trying whatever they could to get through when their cell phones failed them. But when Lebo is asked if he himself has participated in a disaster situation, he says, "To be honest, no." Not in all these years? "If called upon, I would act. But there are dedicated



Mike Lebo

amateur radio people who have specialized in that." Lebo's specialty, by contrast, is building equipment. "When I first got started, I built my own transmitters and receivers. With today's technology you need at least \$100,000 worth of test equipment to get started. So what I build is antennae, and I build big ones. You've seen the antenna I'm going to use for Field Day?"

It is impressively large — 65 feet tall, and portable. "And that antenna didn't just happen. That was the fifth attempt to put it up. The other four came crashing down. So there was a lot of learning. The engineering of it was complicated. It's not like you do what it says in the book. That's because there is no book. There are many ham-radio operators who won't help me with this event, but they say they're going to drive by just to take a picture of it."

The antenna is made of parts readily available at Home Depot, says Lebo, an out-of-work radio-frequency

microwave-design engineer. "Steel and wire and post clamps and string and PVC pipe." Newbies, take note: you do not need such a thing to become a ham. "That's just an exotic antenna. There is a whole other aspect of radio that's called 'stealth' antennae. Those are ones that you could look at and don't see. They go into communities with covenants and restrictions. A guy will put up a flagpole, and he's got his flag waving. In reality, that could be an antenna."

Lebo's setup at home, which is also near Montgomery Field, is even more impressive than the one he will use on Field Day. Attached to a 65-foot palm tree in front of his house is a pole, and attached to the pole is a 30-foot antenna. How did he build that one? "It was very complicated." But did he risk life and limb? "Well, I climbed the palm tree. Does that risk life and limb? If the wind weren't blowing today, I would be putting another antenna on that tree."

But the wind is up, and if the wind is up, I don't climb."

Lebo had concerns that his neighbors would object to the home antenna. "But," he says, "the nearest neighbors cannot see it unless they look up and get a kink in their neck that would be unbearable. The ones a block or two away can see it but they don't care, because, well, they're a block or two away." And how unsightly could it be, anyway? "Well, it touches the sky."

— Jeanne Schinto

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