

Calendar

Pulp Friction

Annual Watermelon Drop

At least this much can be said for last year's Watermelon Queen. He's no media whore. As of this writing, Ben Rothman (UCSD class of '06) did not return requests by phone and e-mail for an interview.

Rothman was slated to be among the judges of this year's Watermelon Queen Pageant. That's where the next Watermelon Queen is chosen. The pageant — actually a talent contest — was scheduled for Wednesday, June 2, in the Price Center between noon and 2:00 p.m. The winner must also know watermelon trivia.

And the prize? It's the honor of dropping the watermelon at the annual Watermelon Drop from the seventh floor of Urey Hall.

Rothman sang to gain his

LOCAL EVENTS

sophomore and human-biology major from Davis, "He changed the lyrics of a popular song to be about watermelon. It's a song by Tenacious D" ["F— Her Gently"]. "He changed it to 'Chuck It Suddenly.'"

Joshel is cochair of the Revelle Programming Board, planner of this event and others for students throughout the year. Last Monday, she admitted having trouble finding contestants for 2004. "I think we have someone who is going to juggle," she said. He or she could juggle a watermelon or two, even though talents need not be watermelon-related. "They could. I don't know. That would be cool."

The whole watermelon thing was purportedly started back in 1965, UCSD's first year of existence, with an exam question written by physics professor Bob Swanson: If a watermelon was dropped from a seven-story building, where would the farthest piece land?

The record, set in 1974, still stands at 167 feet 4 inches.

Who does the measuring? "We have a little measuring tool thing," said Joshel. And who chooses the watermelon? "We order a bunch of watermelons from a farmer, because we give out watermelon to eat. We ask for an extra-big one for the drop."

But one has to wonder if the record will be broken by a super-sized

place in UCSD history. According to Julia Joshel, a



Watermelon Queen, 2003

watermelon or, rather, by the skill and finesse of its dropper. "I don't know," said Joshel. "It's very mysterious. Sometimes it's hard to find the farthest seed."

Joshel said that Swanson, now a professor emeritus, will be on hand for the drop. When phoned to verify that, he was noncommittal. Asked if the tradition really did begin with his exam question, he said, "That's the myth." What's the reality?

"For the first undergraduate freshman class at UCSD, we had what might be called unreasonable expectations," he said. "It was a high-pressure year. And at the end of that year, the students, not I, decided to have a Watermelon Queen and Watermelon Drop. And I was asked to distribute a ballot to elect the Queen" — because all freshmen were required to take his physics class. "And so I made it the last page of the final exam. And then in a

fit of nonsense I proceeded to write an entire exam on watermelons. The myth is that I had an exam question about dropping a watermelon. It's not the case. It was an exam on electricity."

Why was it such a high-pressure situation back in '65? "In starting up this campus, the idea was to attract very high-quality professors and give them a couple of years to get their research laboratories set up or whatever activities they were going to carry on. We all had a chance to get our research careers in line. The trade-off was that some people came in with very little teaching experience. We were not very experienced at dealing with freshmen. And my joke about this is that we considered undergraduates to be 'shrunk graduate students' and treated them like that. And they sort of measured up. Give them a challenge and they'll meet it."

What does he think of the Watermelon Drop in terms of the culture at UCSD, a culture that has evolved into one wherein Ben Rothman wore a two-piece bikini made of watermelon rinds for his drop last year? "Well, it was understandable at the time. Those kids had to blow off steam. The screws were really put to them. They worked very hard. They were really a bright and interesting bunch of people, and I still see a couple of them to this day."

The professor did not comment further, sidestepping any declaration about the caliber of current students. He did, however, issue this disclaimer: "Professional historians say that the recollections of people from umpty-ump years ago are very unreliable. You'd best refer to printed things from the time. So consider my comments in that light."

What was his research area, anyway? "Experimental elementary-particle physics or high-energy physics." Nothing to do with watermelons. "Not a thing. That's condensed-matter physics."

— Jeanne Schinto

39th Annual Watermelon Drop
Friday, June 4, 12:05 p.m.
Urey Hall, Revelle Campus
UCSD
La Jolla
Free
858-344-6741

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