

MIAMI-DADE

AMATEUR RADIO OPERATORS gather for their annual field day, a worldwide competition to establish the most contacts around the globe in 24 hours — and an opportunity to meet fellow hams, **3B**



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For hams on radio, it's a small world

BY LILA ARZUA
larzua@herald.com

As the radio operators twirled the knobs, beeps and burbling broke through the static buzz. Suddenly, a snippet of clear voice rang out.

"Whiskey, four, Nancy, Victor, uniform," Dan Zuckerman quickly responded, spelling out the group's call sign W4NVU as he tried to make contact with a distant counterpart.

It was the annual field day for amateur radio operators, and about 50 hams were gathered at the Miami-Dade County Emergency Operations Center, 9300 NW 41st St., to participate in the annual contest and practice their emergency skills.

The worldwide competition awards the group that is able to establish the most contacts around the globe within a 24-hour period. But Zuckerman and the other federally licensed volunteers were less interested in earning points by logging brief exchanges than in connecting with fellow hams.

"Best part of ham radio is the community. There are all kind of people who are hams. You meet another ham, and they treat you like family," said

Zuckerman, who in the last few days had chatted with people in France, Greece and Pakistan. In fact, a ham he met on the air in the 1980s became a close friend and college roommate.

Saturday, Zuckerman exchanged greetings with an operator on a boat off St. John's in Newfoundland, Canada. And while socializing, the group, consisting of members of several amateur radio clubs, was providing a public service.

"Emergency equipment is only used when there's an emergency. If you don't test it periodically, it doesn't work when you need it," said Lee Ciereszko, the chair of this year's event in Miami-Dade. "That your equipment works, that's all that matters. In an emergency, there's no such thing as points; there's no high score."

Another amateur radio operator, Joe Chwick, puts out newsletters to instruct hams old and new what to do in the event of an emergency. He also runs what he calls Main Net, a weekly program fashioned after talk radio, in which he goes on the air and proclaims controversial opinions in the hope someone will joust with



PETER ANDREW BOSCH/HERALD STAFF

CALLING ALL HAM FANS: Joe Chwick tries to make contact with other ham radio operators around the world during a field day event Saturday at the Miami-Dade County Emergency Operations Center.

him.

On Saturday, however, nobody was arguing with Chwick as he sanded down copper wire as part of a demonstration on how to make an antenna, ostensibly to replace one blown down in a hurricane. "In the event of an emergency, we're the ones who are going to be there," Chwick said, recalling the role of amateur radio operators in the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew in 1992.

That's why Ivan Flores, 13, volunteers with the Red Cross, to learn about using a radio to aid with disaster relief. The rising eighth-grader also enjoys other radio features, such as taking pictures with "slow-scan television" and using a program similar to an Internet chat

room. "I actually get to communicate with my friends," Ivan said.

And one never knows when new friends will be made. "New ham" Ernesto Diaz was in his car last month during an atmospheric condition known as a band opening, which enables VHF radio waves to go further than their usual 50-mile range. That's when he met Jesús, who lives five miles off the coast — in Havana. They talked for about 15 minutes about typical ham topics: the sort of equipment they were using, a comparison of their antennas and how much they enjoyed the hobby.

"Just one of those things when you're sitting there and shooting the breeze," Diaz said.