

UC Davis Picnic Day, 2006

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Picnic Day crowd revels in traditional events

Author: Sharon Stello, Enterprise staff writer

While there were no explosions at the Eighth Annual Physics Show, the demonstrations were just as exciting and educational. To start, physics student David Cherney lay down on a bed of nails.

"If there were one nail on this bed, I would be in trouble. If there were only two nails, it wouldn't be much better," Cherney said. With about 4,000 nails on the board, he said, "it only hurts a little."

Then student Jessica Johnson placed a flat board on Cherney's stomach and a concrete block on top. She picked up a hammer and whacked the concrete block full-force, breaking it into pieces. Cherney emerged unharmed, explaining that the brick absorbed the impact, which felt "more like someone pushing on me gradually."

In the next stunt, student Nikolas Hoepker created a pendulum with a bowling ball hanging from the ceiling on a wire. He started the ball swinging and never moved out of the way.

"When it comes back, it won't hit me," he said. Sure enough, the ball returned to its launching point, only inches from his face.

To show fluid mechanics with air, student John Felde extinguished a candle from half way across the room using an air-zooka. He pulled back on some plastic film in the cylinder. This sent a spinning vortex of air flying toward the candle and "poof!"; the flame went out.

Later, Cherney levitated a ball with high-pressure air. He slowly moved the hose to the side and the ball continued to float due to air pressure in the room "that surrounds us every day" pushing right back to hold the ball in place.

"That's not magic, just physics," Cherney said.

Felde attempted to turn an ordinary pickle into a light bulb. He ran electrical current through this sandwich garnish and, sure enough, it began to glow. He explained that pickles are soaked in brine containing a lot of salt filled with ions that conduct electricity.

In one of the final experiments, student Amit Vainsencher showed off the power of a Tesla coil. When energized, it lit up a long fluorescent bulb from a foot or two away.

After the show, Tilson said she was impressed.

"It was great. They did a wonderful job," said Tilson, the alum who returned with her husband to UCD for Picnic Day. "It brought back lots of memories of physics class."

Tilson added that the show was a neat way to get kids excited about science.

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