



THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

MANAGING

From the issue dated March 22, 2007

DISPATCHES

Lung Group's Stair Climb Has a Leg Up on Other Charity Races

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Chicago

In the American Lung Association of Metropolitan Chicago's largest annual fund-raising event, people are asked to propel themselves a sum total of 1,030 feet.

Kind of a wimpy walkathon — not even a fifth of a mile. That is, until you consider that the distance is measured straight up, translating into 1,632 steps up 94 floors to the observation level of the John Hancock Center, one of the Windy City's signature skyscrapers.

The Lung Association's annual Hustle Up the Hancock is a competitive stair climb, an increasingly popular form of athletic endeavor that sends participants scrambling up the stairwells of tall buildings. Scores of such high-stepping outings are now held around the world and many of them raise money for charities.

The 10-year-old OfficeMax Hustle Up the Hancock (its full name a nod to the sponsoring office-supply chain) is not the oldest competitive stair climb — folks have been racing up the Empire State Building for more than 30 years — nor is it the tallest: Chicago hosts two longer stair climbs, including a charity tromp up the 103-story Sears Tower to benefit cancer research.

Where the Lung Association's climb may have a leg up on the others is in sheer popularity. This year's Hustle, held last month, had room for some 4,000 climbers — and it "sold out" (all slots were claimed) just 31 minutes after online registration began in November.

Like other athletic fund-raising events, participants pay entry fees and seek donation pledges from others. Climbers are encouraged to organize themselves into teams.

Enthusiasm for the event translates into fund-raising success: This year's event brought in some \$1.2-million in pledges, up steeply from the \$84,000 raised its first year.

94 Floors

The Hancock Center's lobby the morning of the climb is a cacophonous madhouse, with long lines of chatting, leg-stretching, water-slurping climbers in numbered bibs snaking back from the stairwell starting points. The sloppy mix of snow, freezing rain, and sleet falling outside has done little to deter an army of eager hoofers ready to act like elevators were never invented.

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The event actually consists of a pair of climbs. A full, 94-floor climb winds its way up one stairwell, while a "half climb," starting on the 42nd floor, heads up another. In both climbs, participants are spaced eight seconds apart at the start and have a small computer chip attached to their shoes to provide an exact start and finish time.

Conspicuous among the lobby throng are the 15 women in matching red shorts and T-shirts that read "Fire Drill." They're a multigenerational group of friends and relatives from as far afield as California and Virginia who, for the second straight year, have used the Hustle as an excuse to reunite.

"It's a fun run and an awesome cause," says Fire Driller Amanda Ball. "We just want to get together and do something active."

Emphasizing the Group's Mission

Surveying the jostling crowd with delight is the chief executive officer of the American Lung Association of Metropolitan Chicago, Joel Africk.

"What we've done is really integrated our mission with the climb," he says in explaining the Hustle's popularity.

The charity aims to prevent lung disease through research, advocacy, and education. Its message can be distilled to: "Your lungs are important, so don't take them for granted." And there is nothing like huffing and puffing up some 1,600 steps to bring such sentiments home.

Based on information collected during registration, nearly half of the Hustlers have a personal connection to lung disease — friends or relatives who have suffered from lung cancer, emphysema, or other respiratory ailments. Many participants themselves have lung diseases or have overcome them, and there are asthmatics, lung-transplant patients, and even folks connected to oxygen tanks taking part in the climb.

There are also a lot of firefighters — a couple of hundred in all, many wearing their trademark helmets and bulky boots. Firefighters, by virtue of their work hazards, suffer a higher rate of respiratory ailments than the general population.

Jim Sempian, a fireman from the North Chicago suburb of Prospect Heights, is participating in his first stair climb, but he's already come to one conclusion. "I know you can't quit halfway up," he says. "If you did that during a fire you'd be in real trouble."

Inside the race stairwells, it's hard to hear much of anything over the insistent, almost tribal beating of feet against steel steps.

Competing with this metallic roar are the shouts of encouragement from volunteer cheerleaders, complete with pompoms, positioned on certain floors.

At this point in the event, one thing not seen is anybody actually running up the stairs. Very few participants are fit enough to take on 94 floors at anything above a steady walking pace.

A special category of "elite climbers," however, took off when the event started

at 7, and they *do* hustle up the stairs. To run with this crew, participants have to have finished among the top 25 racers at previous Hustles or at other sizable stair climbs.

This year's Hustle winner is the returning champion Terry Purcell, who lives in New Berlin, Ill. He flew up the 94 floors in a record-setting time of 9 minutes and 30 seconds. It takes rank-and-file climbers an average of 26 minutes to reach the top.

As she trods relentlessly skyward from about the 44th floor, Cookie Harms has no thoughts of finishing among the elite. She did the half climb last year and simply hopes she can handle this doubling of distance.

"I turned 50 this year and promised myself I'd do the whole climb," says Ms. Harms, who has come to the Hancock as part of a team from a firehouse in nearby Skokie, Ill. She's relying on her regular yoga practice to help her with wind control.

"If I concentrate on my breathing, I don't think about my legs so much," she says.

But then there are other things on her mind as well. "My mother died of lung disease and I'm a nurse, so this event has real meaning for me," she says, before her heavy breathing gets the best of her: "I'm sorry, I can't talk anymore."

Marking a Father's Death

Climbers emerge on the 94th floor flushed, panting, and all smiles, exhaustion swathed in the ebullience of achievement. Cheering volunteers place souvenir medals around the sweaty necks and usher the drained climbers into "banana row," where heaps of the restorative fruit and bottles of water can be had.

"It was definitely worth it," says Marc Elias, minutes after completing his first Hustle. "This building looks so massive from the street and it's really something to come up here by foot."

"Of course," he adds, "we have to believe we're on the 94th floor," referring to the impenetrable whiteness of a low-hanging cloud that has robbed climbers of one choice reward for their efforts: the gorgeous view.

Less concerned about the vanished vista is Rachel Rose, a medical student from Ann Arbor, Mich., who has made the climb seven times before. Her self-styled T-shirt reads, "This one is for you Dad. You are the wind beneath my wings."

"My father was diagnosed with lung cancer in 1998, right before I graduated high school, and died in 2000," Ms. Rose says. "When I found out about this race I just thought of him. He was always out of breath."

Though she doesn't run up the stairs, she does climb two steps at a time, and in 2001 finished in under 15 minutes, good enough for first place in the division for people younger than 18. This year she completed the climb with the far-from-shabby time of 16:44.

"We made it! We made it!" Ms. Ball of the Fire Drill team exclaims. "We had some girls that didn't think they were going to finish, but here we are."

The Fire Drill team took fourth-place honors for team fund raising, with more than \$15,000 in pledges.

Having finished the climb, the boisterous ladies in red shorts are chatting about the rumors of free beer being offered somewhere.

That somewhere proves to be a Hilton hotel across the street, site of a post-Hustle party and health expo thrown by the Lung Association, complete with both free beer and buffet for climbers. A U2 cover band — with the appropriate-for-the-day name Vertigo USA — is on hand for tunes.

There's just one wrinkle. As climbers tramp into the Hilton lobby, they learn that the party is three flights up, and elevator service is slow and spotty.

"What, more stairs?" comes the oft-repeated cry as climbers assess the situation. But then few say much else. They just toss on a determined look and march upward.

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