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Putting the river in Riverfest River agencies keep busy patrolling a crowded waterway

By Luke E. Saladin
Post staff report

With the weather surprisingly cooperative and the Cincinnati night sky bursting into smiley faces, WEBN logos and white waterfalls, hundreds of boats packed the riverfront to get a peak at the Riverfest fireworks.

Boaters say there isn't a better place to watch the fireworks than directly under them, which is why river people began dropping anchor as early as a week ago to catch the show from the best spot.

Rocking boats anchored between the orange and white buoys set out as boundaries for viewing are prime seats.

By 6 p.m. on Friday, harbormaster Bill Manis said all 450 spots at the Watertown Yacht Club has been reserved for the weekend, forcing him to turn down some groups.

When the sky began erupting to anthems by The Who, Metallica and other rockers, boats were packed side to side, their passengers gazing into the brilliant sky.

"I think people are extra eager to get out for Labor Day weekend because of the bad weather we've had all summer," Manis said. "We only took reservations with a two-night minimum and we had no trouble filling the place."

But with all those boats come potential problems, especially just after the festivities are over on Sunday night. . . and all those boaters want to get home.

That means the busiest night of the year for crews like the Boone County Water Rescue, one of 26 agencies patrolling the river Sunday night.

"It has been pretty quiet so far, just a few little things," said Dale Appel, director of the Boone County Water Rescue, a group of 30-plus volunteers who patrol the bank of the Ohio River from Big Bone Creek to Locust Pike on the Licking River.

"As soon as the fireworks are over, things will really pick up. We'll probably be out until about 2 a.m. to 4 a.m."

Three boats and a total of 13 volunteers and two Covington firefighters comprised the water rescue's crew on Sunday.

Work begins about 10 a.m. Each boat includes at least one operator, an emergency medical technician and two other crew members.

At 7:20 p.m. one of the boats was called to a possible jumper on the Newport Southbank Bridge, but it turned out the person was actually inland on Columbia Parkway in Cincinnati.

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"Typically we work a lot of scrapes and cuts and we also tow a lot of people, but you never know when a really big emergency might happen," said Ezra Elmore, a volunteer for the past 11 years. "One year we saved a woman who had a stroke on a boat."

Ron Sarver, a spokesman for the Lexington, Ky.- based National Association of State Boating Law Administrators, which represents boating authorities in all 50 states, said the most common factor in boating accident is alcohol consumption.

"Even if you have a designated driver and you drink alcohol you can't guarantee your safety," Sarver said.

"Unlike a car, when you are in the water you can still wind up drowning even though you aren't driving."

The issue is especially troubling at Riverfest.

Alcohol is banned at all Riverfest festivities, meaning people on private boats and riverfront restaurants are the only ones who can drink legally.

"Typically as the day goes on you start seeing more problems related to alcohol," said Al Guidi, who along with his wife, Kim, has volunteered with the unit for 12 years. "For most people it's not a problem, but there are a few that start goofing off and that is when injuries happen."

While the rescue unit does everything from helping stranded boaters to recovering the bodies of drowning victims, on this particular night they are providing emergency medical technicians to other law enforcement.

The rescue unit has been patrolling for 36 years, but it almost didn't make it to Riverfest this year.

While making cuts to its budget a few months ago, the Boone County Fiscal Court considered doing away with the rescue unit. The court had cut funds for the volunteer unit every year since 1999, complaining that even though several counties use the service, a la River fest, Boone County is responsible for funding the bulk of it.

To guarantee the unit's existence, Apple agreed to cut his budget from \$217,132 to \$85,000 this year. The unit consists of about 30 volunteers and six vessels, including one that serves as a floating ambulance, and assorted rescue and diving gear. Kenton County and Covington kick in about \$15,000 year.

Campbell County Water Rescue, which also worked Riverfest, has three fire and rescue boats and a swift water raft.

Capt. Barth Johnson of the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources, who has patrolled Riverfest by boat for the past 25 years, said having an agency like the Boone County Water Rescue helps.

"More than 90 percent of what we do is crowd control, so it is pretty much just like an event on land," Johnson said. "During Riverfest the river becomes Interstate 75 -- It can get pretty hectic, so the more the merrier as far as I'm concerned."

Publication Date: 09-01-2003



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