

Manly men pit facial hair in food bank fundraiser

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This is a contest for men — burly, manly men, the type who like their steaks rare, their dogs big and their hands callused.

It's a contest steeped in a basic human function, with no skill or particular desire necessary.

It's a beard-growing contest, and it's one that would make Karl Marx or Ulysses S. Grant proud.

Now in its third official year, the Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School beard contest kicked off this week, pitting 25 male staff members against each other in maybe the laziest challenge ever: Don't shave until winter break.

"We do it mostly to annoy our spouses," joked John Zehner, a social studies teacher at the school. "But seriously, the money we raise goes to a good cause."

The contestants arrived clean-shaven after Thanksgiving break, and come Dec. 18, students and faculty at the school will vote on their favorite beard, paying \$1 for each ballot they cast. All the money raised — which has totaled over \$6,000 in the past two years — goes to support the Capital Area Food Bank.

While the goal may seem simple, the variety of facial hair even one week in shows how tough it can be to grow a beard.

Among the 25 teachers participating, the beards vary greatly: dark beards, gray beards, stubbly beards, five o'clock shadows, moustaches with stubble, and even one moustache that stretches nearly ear to ear.

That specimen, grown by English teacher Jon Virden, made way for the Virden Amendment, which allows moustached teachers to keep their moustaches while still growing a beard across the rest of their face.

"You're allowed to trim around the neck, but if you shave, you're out," said history teacher Hunter Hogewood.

The price is \$10 to enter, but it's also \$10 to quit.

And as if the title of best beard isn't enough, there's also the shirt.

A Croft and Barrow, extra-extra large, green and red flannel shirt is passed on from winner to winner each year, a trophy proudly flaunted the next day at school.

"It's like the green jacket or yellow jersey," Zehner said, referring to the items of clothing given to the winner of golf's Masters tournament and cycling's Tour de France, respectively.

The contest started in 2001, Zehner said, when he and a colleague just decided not to shave until holiday break. It has now grown beyond the walls of Bethesda-Chevy Chase as well, to a school in New York where Zehner's brother is the principal.

And the male staff members recognize that they are missing out on a large contingent of possible participants.

"There has been some question about how to get the women involved, maybe by not shaving their underarm hair or something like that," Hogewood said.

So far, no takers.