

Double trouble: Ohio seeing double on world twins parade



by Chuck Bowen

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This tiny Midwestern US town was seeing double this weekend -- and researchers of human behavior could not be more pleased.

More than 3,500 twins, triplets and quadruplets came to a place named after its twin founders for what event organizers call the largest gathering of twins in the world.

Twinsburg, a suburb of Cleveland with a population of 17,000, plays host to the Twins Days festival every year, and thousands of them were in town Saturday, marching down the main thoroughfare to peals of applause and the snapping of cameras.

The city was founded in the early 1800s, and, according to local lore, two of its earliest settlers were twin brothers who offered city leaders some of their land if they would rename the city Twinsburg.

Twins, triplets and quadruplets come from all across the United States and as far away as Australia, Britain and Japan to meet others in the same genetic boat and -- for at least a few days -- feel like part of the crowd.

"All the twins, you just relate to them so well," said Stuart Daniel of the camaraderie that pervaded the festival grounds on the hot August day. "They understand you. It feels normal. They're just like us."

Stuart and his brother, Phillip, toured the festival in the uniforms they wear at their jobs as surf life-guards -- bright yellow jerseys, red swim trunks, sandals, and red-and-yellow swim caps tied under the chin.

The 39-year-old brothers said they live and work together, and had even come close to marrying a set of twin women. The Australians were on their way to take part in one of several research studies being conducted at the festival.

Multiple births -- most often twins -- occur when an egg is fertilized and then splits into two developing zygotes, or when two eggs are fertilized by different sperm. The results are, respectively, identical and fraternal twins.

And multiple births, especially identical twins, are of intense interest to scientists. Since identical twins have exactly the same genetic makeup, they are a boon to researchers studying what plays a greater role in development: nature or nurture?

To that end, schools such as Harvard, Northwestern and the University of California, San Diego set up tents in attempts to lure twins to take part in studies on reproductive health, dental care, taste preferences and depth perception.

James Fowler, a professor of political science at the University of California at San Diego, and his team of researchers were using twin volunteers to learn more about humans' innate levels of altruism and selfishness.

The researchers had twins play a series of games in which they decided how much play money they would give an unseen, non-twin participant. That participant then would decide how much to give back to the twin.

The team of researchers was using the twins to study if someone's levels of selfishness or altruism were based more on their genetics or on how they were raised.

"It's incredibly valuable," Fowler said of the festival, which brings thousands of twins streaming past his team's camp. "We came here for a more representative sample ... a more diverse mix" of people.

A few tents away, a team of students from Harvard was researching the differences in three-dimensional vision and depth perception in twin siblings.

The team, said Jeremy Wilmer, was learning things "you can only learn through twins."

But not everyone was at the festival under such academic auspices. Jon and Nick Morgan, 23, were in town filming a series of interviews with other twins for a late-night television show they work on in London.

The Morgans, with tightly cropped, gelled blonde hair, sparkling white teeth and shiny diamond-stud earrings, stopped as many sets of female multiples they could harangue in front of the camera. The brothers said they enjoyed their first trip to the festival.

"Back at home, you don't get many (twins)," Nick said. "You get a lot of stares and points."

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