

Physics troupe mixes humor with education

Will Conley
Staff Reporter

Sporting tie-dyed T-shirts and khaki shorts, four physics professors squirted cold water at a decompressed metal barrel. The barrel imploded with a loud pop; screams of delight erupted from the youthful audience.

Six University and high school physics instructors, dubbed "Physics Force: the Next Generation," presented a series of demonstrations the Tate Lab of Physics on Monday.

The show featured more than 20 demonstrations, including a "tablecloth pull," a professor riding a Hovercraft, a tug of war pitting audience members against air pressure and a professor trapped inside a depressurized garbage bag.

Mostly children and some University students attended the show.

The goal of the troupe is to introduce physics concepts to children by mixing jokes, entertainment and education.

"We want to bring science to as many children as possible," said Louise Weldon, a Tartan High School physics teacher and troupe member.

"I already knew some of the physics equations behind it, so it was interesting," said Rory Lonergan, an Orono High School student who attended the demonstration.

The volunteer group carries on the tradition of "Physics Force," a veteran troupe with similar make-up and repertoire that gave its first show in 1985. The group still stages 12 shows a year. When the popularity of the original group grew too large, a second troupe was begun.

"I saw the original team. When I heard they were starting a second team, I jumped at it," said Cindy Cattell, associate professor of physics at the University.

"Physics Force: The Next Generation" performed for the



Photo/Sean McCoy

Jim Kakalios, an associate professor of physics and member of "Physics Force: The Next Generation," demonstrates the strength of air pressure by being sucked into a plastic bag Monday afternoon during a presentation in the Tate Laboratory of Physics. About 200 people, mostly children and University students, saw the event, which explained some of the laws of physics.

first time in January. They performed this year for Take Your Daughters to Work Day, and at St. Joseph's Children's Home in April and a fantasy/science fiction convention.

James Kakalios, associate professor of physics also participates in the troupe, which consists of three University professors and three high school teachers.

These professors will eventually

completely replace the original troupe, said Kakalios.

He summed up the purpose of the show in his opening remarks.

"Physics is not about having an encyclopedic knowledge about all the answers," Kakalios said. "Rather, physics is about asking the right questions."