

This fixed-distance air cannon was one of many student-designed contraptions aimed at providing a memorable introduction to engineering by flinging pumpkins through the air.

STUDENT ENGINEERS KICK OFF THEIR OU CAREERS WITH A WACKY TERM PROJECT THAT IS MORE THAN JUST FUN AND GAMES.

By DEBRA LEVY MARTINELLI PhotosbyRobertTaylor





TOP: An array of long-distance (3/4 mile) air cannons greets Pumpkin Toss spectators. The competition winner, at 7/8 of a mile, topped the world record set by a professional group of "punkin chunkers." OU is the only U.S. university in the pumpkin-tossing business. BOTTOM: Contestants in the short-range, slingshot design division hurl a pumpkin down the firing range on OU's North Campus.

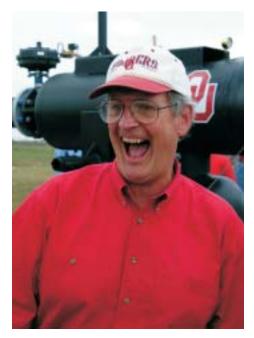
hey fly through the air with a whooshanda zing, and landwith a thudor a splat, showering the Oklahoma autum sky with bursts of color. They are pumpkins, Charlie Brownpumpkins that are ejected from cannons, catapults and even cars as part of the University of Oklahoma College of Engineering's annual Pumpkin Toss.

Since it began in 2001, the event has become a local favorite, with family, friends, neighbors and passers by watching in awe as freshman students in the Introduction to Engineering course fire up the contraptions they have designed and built, send-ing these round, colored gourds off into the atmosphere.

The Pumpkin Toss was adapted by electrical and computer engineering professor John Fagan from similar national and regional competitions as a way for students new to the College of Engineering to start their academic careers with, well, abarg.

"I was looking for a contest that freshmen could participate in and that they would remember for the rest of their lives," says Fagan, who, with industrial engineering professor Hillel Kumin, teaches the course. "I mean, how many





An exuberant professor John Fagan watches the finale of the course he teaches with engineering colleague Hillel Kumin.



With skies threatening more of the rain that had drenched the firing area, engineering student Riley Wade Douthit, in a scene reminiscent of the movie *Dr. Strangelove*, mounts his air cannon to take aim on a target down range.





peoplehaveeverbuiltadevicetotossa pumpkinamile?"

The object of the competition is for each eight- to 10-member student team to design and build a launcher to "toss" a pupkin, without crushing it, at a select group of targets 250 feet to three-quarters of a mile away. One 2004 team hurled a pupkin approximately seven-eighths of amile (4,620 feet), shattering the world record by more than 800 feet.

Student Krystal Bessey, whose team built an air cannonmade from a propane tank, valveard 15-foot pipe, says she was shocked when she first learned that she and her class mates would be expected not only to design and build the device but also obtain corporate sponsorship to underwrite the costs of the project.

"Indneverbeen apart of anything that compared to this. It was a big 'Welcome to College!' "she says. "[The Punpkin Toss] made me realize that I was finally being educated on what I would be doing for the rest of my life, and this was

ABOVE LEFT: Parents at the annual competition nearly outnumber participants,

many citing the Toss as the highlight of their offsprings' OU experience. BOTTOM: At an air cannon's breech end, ammunition awaits launching. only the beginning; the projects to come would be even bigger and more exciting."

Inpast years, only students in the Introduction to Engineering course have participated in the project. But Fagan said the public's enthusias mprompted him and Kumin to extend an invitation to course a lumni and members of the public to participate in the 2004 competition.

"The Pumpkin Toss really captures people's imaginations, "hesays. "Students tellme it's one of their greatest college experiences because they have an early, hands-on experience as well as an opportunity to get to know other students with whom they'll study and socialize over the next fewyears. Parents tellme they've never seen their children so excited about doing anything in their lives."

Bessey's Pungkin Tossexperience has only solidified her decision to pursue an engineering career. "It was a lot of responsibility, and a lot of faithwasput in us. I realized that there is more to engineering than the actual jobdes cription. It's about tean work and maxing out your imagination. This competition confirmed that engineering is what I want to do for the rest of my life."

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