Maplewood takes Laugh-In event seriously

City again this year looked to laughter to deepen ties between residents and public servants.

By Gabriel Sanchez Star Tribune

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PHOTOS BY CHAD BERGO, CITY OF MAPLEWOOD

Maplewood police officers swapped jokes for temporary tattoos at the 2016 Laugh-In event,

What is this, some kind of a joke?

That's exactly what the city of Maplewood, in partnership with performance group Z Puppets Rosenschnoz, was hoping for at its Laugh-In event on April Fools' Day during its second annual Day of Laughter.

Saturday's event was designed to have residents interact with city officials and police outside of the standard and sometimes contentious situations that accompany their jobs.

"Our goal is to bring people together across cultures," Z Puppets Co-Creative Director Shari Aronson said, "and to instigate some positive connections between police officers, the City Council and community members."

This year's event was slated to include exhibits from community groups, a proclamation of the Day of Laughter from Mayor Nora Slawik, a community talent show and a joke swap contest. City Council members and police officers were to compete in collecting jokes from residents.

"The reality is, most of the time our officers are responding to peoples' needs for services because there's an issue," Police Chief Paul Schnell said. "This becomes a way for us to interact in a different sort of way and have some fun with the community."

The City Council and the Police Department each choose three jokes — clean ones, mind you — to submit to audience scrutiny. The joke that receives the most applause is determined to be the winner.

"We get some jokes we cannot air in this forum," Schnell said. "We vetted all these different jokes and we ultimately selected the jokes that we wanted to put in the competition."

A clown with Z Puppets Rosenschnoz collected audio of laughter for the Kid City Laughter Museum at the 2016 Laugh-In event, at the Maplewood YMCA.

The winning joke last year: "What chews trees and sings?" Slawik said. "Justin Beaver."

The grand prize was a birthday party at the Maplewood Community Center and a photo with the mayor and police chief. Five semifinalists were to receive passes to Saints North Inline and Roller Skating Center. And the department that submitted the winning joke gets bragging rights.

"We work hard to make sure that we get the best jokes," Schnell said.

Saturday's talent show was to feature a Hmong dance group, a Bollywood-dancing kindergartner and a youth choir. "It's a real mix," Aronson said, "but we want to really emphasize youth in the community."

Those attending the event could submit their laugh and a funny face to Maplewood's Laughter Museum, in which an audio recordings of laughter are added to an interactive art piece.

"You can see and hear the people of Maplewood," Aronson said. "It really gets across the idea that laughter is universal. You don't know what color someone's skin is, and you don't necessarily know what their gender or age is from hearing them laugh. You're just hearing them as a human at their most joyful."

Participants could also fish for jokes in a pond provided by the Maplewood Nature Center, and learn about wetlands while observing a live toad and salamander. Police were to provide an animal guest of their own: one of their K-9 officers.

"That's always the hit of the show," Schnell said. "The mayor gives us grief because the dog is always a big draw."