On the surface, seeing 150,000 yellow rubber ducks floating down the Ohio River is quirky fun. But the regatta is responsible for feeding tens of thousands in our region.

Thousands of people Sunday will line the banks of the Ohio to watch a startling spectacle of community goodwill: the splash of 150,000 yellow rubber ducks in a wacky, wobbly race down the river.

The Rubber Duck Regatta celebrates 20 years today — an end-of-summer Cincinnati tradition that’s also the longest-running, most successful hunger fundraiser of its type in the nation. At least 100 other cities host duck regattas to raise money for food pantries and charity, but none comes close to Cincinnati’s success.

Credit the regatta’s timing with Sunday night’s P&G Riverfest and Cincinnati Bell/WEBN Fireworks blowout, support from Cincinnati-based Kroger and other major sponsors, the passion of workers at the Freestore Foodbank — and the generosity of tens of thousands of residents who contribute $5 per duck in hopes it outruns the others to win its donor a new Honda Accord Sport.

“The regatta does two things,” says Bob Edwards, local regatta founder and chairman and Freestore board member. “It makes it possible for us to do more for more people, and it has made the community more aware of the need locally and how the Freestore services food pantries and shelters.”

The release of the ducks at 3 p.m. from the Purple People Bridge has the potential to raise enough money for the Freestore Foodbank to provide more than 2 million meals to children and families in need.

Since it started two decades ago, the regatta has netted $7.4 million and allowed the Freestore Foodbank to provide 22.2 million meals, including the Power Packs, the popular weekend food bags distributed to schoolchildren.

“Our budget is thin, but we manage,” says Nichole Tipton, 31. She and her husband, Timothy Dyas, and their four children are grateful for the help the Freestore Foodbank provides. The Power Packs distributed through Newport Independent Schools are especially welcome, she says:

“They really help us stretch our food budget.”
Local race: Community, corporate love affair

The regatta has soaked into the region's collective consciousness for many reasons.

It's an inexpensive way to help. It's convenient to donate. There are prizes as incentives to participate. And the event is linked to the region's largest fireworks display of the year, a relationship that started before the first regatta.

Edwards went to fireworks' sponsor WEBN, "and they allowed us to be connected," Edwards says. "Simple as that."

Not so simple has been the positive reputation the Freestore Foodbank has built over many years, another reason for the regatta's popularity. It ties with a duck race in Knoxville, Tennessee, for longevity, but the event there drops no more than 40,000 duck each year.

"The Freestore is an elite organization," says Jennifer Lien, a spokeswoman for the Kroger Co., a regatta sponsor from its first year. "It's a great fit for us. We work with the Freestore throughout the year. Hunger relief is our biggest focus."

Local Kroger stores sell regatta ducks in the check-out lines.

"Our (employees) love to sell ducks," Lien says. "They feel like they are making a difference in their community. They know that everything stays right here."

The Freestore has secured other major local corporations as sponsors: Cincinnati-Northern Kentucky Honda Dealers, Kembra Credit Union, Church & Dwight Co. Inc. and WKRC-TV (Channel 12).

That sense of community created by the regatta extends to the larger community, says Joe Girandola, director of the master in fine arts program at the University of Cincinnati's College of Design, Art, Architecture and Planning. He has been on faculty there for three years.

"What I have found since coming to Cincinnati is it was built on ingenuity of people of modest means who rise to the occasion to celebrate anything – the worst of times and the best of times," Girandola says. He cited the popularity of Downtown's Oktoberfest street party and Lumenocity, the Cincinnati Symphony Pops concert and light show at Washington Park.

Girandola, as an art professor and professional artist, is known best for his duct-tape drawings for which he uses multi-colored Duck Tape brand tape. So he's a kindred spirit, in a way, of the Rubber Duck Regatta.

"We have made a lot of vessels out of duct tape and other materials to stretch their strength," he says. "I can appreciate all those ducks floating down the river."
Working family relies on food programs as ‘bridge’

Nichole Tipton appreciates the floating ducks for a different reason.

Even though her husband works full-time for a countertop manufacturer and installer and has health insurance benefits for himself and his three birth children, Tipton and her birth daughter have public medical cards. She also receives food stamps, known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP.

“It’s a great bridge for us,” she says.

The family’s four children –first-grader Timmy, fifth-grader Lexie, sixth-grader Katie and high school freshman Dalton – all have received Power Pack food bags each Friday for several academic years.

Ninety-two schools in the region participate in the Freestore’s Power Pack program, which reaches 4,100 students. Participating schools identify families and children who could benefit. Each pack, which costs $5 to create, contains healthful foods to ensure children receive proper nutrition over the weekend: whole grain cereal, fruit and vegetable juices, applesauce, canned fruit, apple-oatmeal bars and canned pasta meals. The program costs $750,000 a year and is paid for, largely, by proceeds from the Rubber Duck Regatta.

“The kids love them,” Tipton says of Power Packs. Timmy received his Power Pack the weekend before Labor Day and shared his food with his siblings. The older three children will begin getting their packs next weekend.

The family has a rent-to-own agreement on their house in Newport. They pay $625 a month and are five years into a 10-year agreement, at which point ownership will be transferred to them.

Despite the food assistance programs and public medical care they receive, Tipton considers her family middle class, not lower-middle class or working poor. She recently completed her GED and is taking college courses online through the University of Phoenix. Tipton says she is working hard to set a positive example for her children about the importance of education. They, in turn, encourage her to do her homework.

The family is typical of families receiving food stamps and other private food assistance. These are not unemployed people – “moochers,” as some SNAP critics say – or people who’ve given up the job search. They are the working poor, their children and the disabled.

SNAP is the only public aid that 85 percent of Ohio’s 1.82 million SNAP recipients receive, according to 2013 data. That number is up 57 percent from the pre-recession number of 1.15 million in 2007. Kentucky has experienced a similar increase, up 134 percent from 633,000 to 849,000.

‘How can we have so many people in need?’
The national anti-hunger nonprofit Feeding America estimates that up to 300,000 people in the Freestore Foodbank’s 20-county service area in Southwest Ohio, Northern Kentucky and Southeast Indiana are “food insecure” – meaning that their food intake and eating patterns are disrupted by a lack of money or other resources. About 100,000 of them are children.

The United Way of Greater Cincinnati recognizes the need and importance of the work done by the Freestore Foodbank. In its past year of funding, the local United Way allocated $471,960 – one of its largest agency investments – to the Freestore.

Outside of the Power Pack program, the Freestore uses the equation of providing three meals for every dollar raised.

"There is so much need here," says Edwards, 80, who still works part-time as a financial planner and volunteers his time to oversee the regatta. "How can that happen in Cincinnati? How can we have so many people in need?

"That's why we do this. We try to make the regatta better every year. The more ducks we can sell, the more we can expand our programs and provide food to more people."

Not too late

Ducks can be purchased until 2:30 p.m. Sunday, just a half hour before the Rubber Duck Regatta, at www.rubberduckregatta.org (http://www.rubberduckregatta.org/).

First prize for the owner of the winning duck is a 2014 Honda Accord Sport, courtesy of Cincinnati-Northern Kentucky Honda Dealers, and possibly $1 million if the winner is the "Kemba Million Dollar Duck."

Second prize is $100 a week from Kroger for a year, a total of $5,200. Five additional winners will receive $500 from Kemba Credit Union.

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