

RENAISSANCE MAN

DAVID ULLMAN'S KINETIC CREATURES

BY URSULA EVANS-HERITAGE

Eugene might have Nike, Prefontaine and high-profile running events throughout the year. But Corvallis has a race of an entirely different kind: The Kinetic Sculpture Race.

And when it comes to new ideas and innovation 61-year-old David Ullman has been leading the pack for the last three years with his fantastic human-powered walking creatures. A retired OSU engineering professor, Ullman also has his own mechanical engineering design business. He holds a Ph.D. in mechanical

city streets, climb a sand dune, get across 3,000 feet of clay pasture, 200 feet of deep mud and finally float down two miles of the Willamette River.

"A group of us got to talking, saying 'Let's see if we can build something that doesn't have any wheels,' ... was it even possible to build a human-powered walking machine?" Ullman said. A team member built a model with Legos, and it walked, which seemed promising. So the group began talking about the idea in November of 2002, building in February and the final product, a kinetic ant, was

called us back," Ullman said. But if they did create the categories, the kinetic ant would hold both records: It reached the speed of 5 mph for 50 meters and walked 1.2 miles.

This year, the ant was broken down into two separate entries. Ullman's was "like a dragon skeleton pulling a chariot," he says. Will he design more kinetic sculptures in the future? Maybe, if someone thinks of an interesting idea. "We've pushed the one idea about as far as we can technically, and nobody has a better idea at the moment," he said.

as you don't get hung up on your ego, if they work, they're fine. It's like writing. Some things you write are really good ... other things you look back at and think — who wrote this crap?"



engineering design from Ohio State and an MS in aerospace controls from the University of Cincinnati. "I've wanted to be an engineer since I was 3 years old ... my father was an electronics guy and he put a hammer in my hand and I started banging on things," he said. After working as the Kinetic Sculpture Race's chief engineering judge for 10 years, he finally decided to enter it himself. Except he wanted to do something different — build a sculpture that actually walks.

The race is part of Corvallis' annual three-day festival, da Vinci Days, held in July. To reach the finish line, the sculptures must travel more than 10 miles of

ready just in time for da Vinci Days in July 2003. Anywhere from eight to 10 people worked on the project in a given week.

That first year, the goal was to get the ant across the starting line, says Ullman. And it did just that, walking about 50 yards before breaking down. The second year the team had two goals: to break the world record for the fastest speed and the farthest distance that a human powered walking machine could travel. They met both goals, maybe because there were no pre-existing records. "We contacted the Guinness Book of World Records and they seemed interested, but then never

If the Kinetic Sculpture Race invokes the spirit of Leonardo da Vinci, certainly Ullman can be called a Renaissance man because his true interest lies in design. "So that's what I've made my career," he says. "I designed bicycles, I designed kinetic sculptures, I designed software. I like creating stuff. I don't much care what it is." He's worked as a design consultant for many different companies including Boeing, Hewlett Packard and Harley Davidson. Ullman also holds the patent for a type of recumbent bicycle.

"The whole creative process is fun because you give birth to ideas and you see if they work or not," he said. "As long

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