

Drizzle takes sizzle out of fire walk

Rain puts a damper on Friday evening's event, disappointing the evening's star, his skeptics and spiritual seekers.

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[Times photos: Maurice Rivenbark]
Fire walker Gary Shawkey, center, stands near a bed of glowing coals.



Gary Shawkey, center, talks with media crews.

BROOKSVILLE - A woman named Grace came looking for enlightenment.

Another who used to eat fire came looking to see if she could walk on it.

And skeptics from around the country showed up to ensure no one tried to make a miracle out of something explainable by "critical thinking, freedom of inquiry and the scientific outlook," as one of their pamphlets read.

Yet both the hardened skeptics and the true believers left the Hernando County Fairgrounds disappointed Friday night. An attempt to set a new fire walking record was doused by a torrential rainstorm about 30 minutes before current Guinness Book record-holder Gary Shawkey and friends were to take off their shoes and hit the coals.

Shawkey, an Internet marketer and self-proclaimed "self-help guru" from Spring Hill, vowed to make another attempt at the record. But when or where it may come is uncertain.

Until the heavens opened up, the event had all the makings for a night of great drama.

Spread out across a fairgrounds show ring was a 200-foot line of cedar wood that was set ablaze with matches and diesel fuel. Smoke billowed. Waves of heat shimmered. And the straight arrow line of orange flames provided a dramatic effect.

David Willey - a physics instructor billed as "The Mad Scientist" when he appears on The Tonight Show with Jay Leno - ran up and down the fire line taking temperature readings with an infrared sensor gun.

Brooksville firefighters, intrigued by a man who would tread barefoot through flames they wear bunker gear against, stood by in case anyone became more than just a fire walker.

A film crew - with fuzzy sound boom in hand - taped Shawkey's every move for an upcoming A&E Network documentary.

TV news crews, armored with satellite trucks, waited to beam the record attempt back to their stations in time for the late local news.

And a DJ hired by Shawkey set the whole evening to music with such flame-inspired classics as Johnny Cash's Ring of Fire, Bruce Springsteen's I'm on Fire, and the Doors' Light My Fire.

Grace Sutkus, 42, of Spring Hill, came to the fire walk wanting to know more about getting to the same "spiritual place" as the fire walkers. "I think it would enrich me," she said.

Another seeker was Jennifer Martin, 29, of Spring Hill. "I eat fire," she said, "so I am always into other types of performance activities."

As a fire eater, she used to be the opening act for bands on the Seattle club scene. "I can tell you, you do it very carefully," she said.

The most serious-minded folks out for the evening were the unbelievers.

The Tampa Bay Skeptics, the Center for Inquiry and the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal were each represented. They came bringing business cards, newsletters and brochures describing their skeptical habits.

Their two biggest concerns were Shawkey's claims he would walk on coals reaching 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit and his claims of putting himself in "a state of unconsciousness, the space between your thoughts" to manage the feat.

The skeptics were out to dispel any notion that fire walking is a supernatural activity. Instead, they say, fire walking is well understood - at temperatures around 1,000 degrees, wood coals can't transfer heat quickly enough to burn fast-moving feet.

Willey, who claims to have walked a 165-foot bed of coals heated to more than 1,000 degrees, said Shawkey would have needed liquid oxygen bubbling from beneath his wood pile or industrial-sized fans blowing air over it to produce 1,800-degree temperatures.

At those temperatures, feet burn instantly, Willey said.

About a half hour before the fire walk was due to begin, with the flames still burning, Willey took temperature readings that showed Shawkey's fire was averaging 1,000 degrees Fahrenheit.

Still, Willey said the fire walk - while likely to take place on coals cooler than 1,000 degrees after they were raked down - would still be impressive because of the length.

But before anyone had a chance to test the coals, 30 minutes of hard rain fell on the fairgrounds. Shawkey, who owns the current Guinness World Record, said there was nothing he could prove on a dampened bed. And he didn't bother trying.

Willey, however, took a go at it and crossed the 200 feet at a trot. He said large patches of the bed had been doused, making it far from record-worthy.

Toni Van Pelt, executive director of the Center for Inquiry, said she and the other skeptics weren't there to play the role of the wise guy who ruins the fun of a magic show by revealing the magician's secrets.

Instead, she said they merely wanted to put a scientist's eye on Shawkey's claims. "People need to use critical thinking skills and not be duped," she said.

Gary Posner, who founded the Tampa Bay Skeptics, smugly quipped that perhaps Shawkey should have consulted a psychic about the weather before scheduling his fire walking event.

For his part, Shawkey said it was the Guinness people who measured his last record-setting fire walk and declared that it had taken place on a fire bed averaging 1,800 degrees.

Still, fliers promoting this latest record attempt last week said the new record would take place on 1,800-degree coals. Banners hung around the fairgrounds Friday proclaimed a "1200 to 1800" degree fire walk.

Whatever the temperature, Shawkey believes fire walking is a metaphor for life. "What you focus on, what you place your attention on, you will get," he said.

Despite the rain, Shawkey said he succeeded in drawing media attention. While most of it focused on the fire walk spectacle, some trickled over to promote the "porn-free, scam-free, spam-free" Internet portal his company is launching on the Fourth of July.

On a night when rain stole the show, Shawkey turned philosophical.

"For whatever reason, God said no and it rained."