

DJ to call billboard home
19-day stunt to raise money for charity
By Jaime Garzon and Fred Lucas THE NEWS-TIMES
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You might say billboards are his specialty. No, Neil Hedley doesn't design them. He lives on them.

Starting next week, the radio personality plans to take up temporary residence on top of the billboard on Padanaram Road across from the North Street shopping center in Danbury.

This will be at least the 10th time, in Canada and the U.S., that Hedley will have spent part of the holiday season atop a billboard to raise money for the needy.

But this 19-day stay comes later in the year than usual, which means it will be colder than during his previous outings.

"I've got to get over this cold first," said Hedley, coughing as he explained plans for his adventure.

At 6 a.m. next Monday, Hedley will move into the tent on the billboard, with a laptop computer, radio equipment to broadcast on location, a small heater and a lot of blankets. He won't come down until the evening of Dec. 16, nine days before Christmas.

It's a publicity stunt by WRKI-FM (I-95) of Brookfield to raise money for the United Way of Northern Fairfield County, which is trying to meet \$1 million in additional requests.

"Since I first started doing this, it became my calling card," said Hedley, 38, who hosts a weekday morning radio show with Ethan Carey. "But it's not about what I'm doing. If people drive by and see that idiot up on a billboard, hopefully they will stop to see what that idiot is doing."

The effort won't raise \$1 million, Hedley said. But, the fundraising effort took in several thousand dollars when he worked for a radio station in Canada.

"People start to think about people other than themselves this time of year," Hedley said. "This year, with the hurricanes and tragedies that have shook the world, people need help, especially those in our own backyard."

"People tell me I'm going to freeze up on the billboard and I tell them not to worry about me," the Toronto native added. "I tell them this is a way to focus some attention on the thousands of people who live in the freezing cold weather every day and they respond, 'Oh my God, I never looked at it that way.'"

The 38 non-profit agencies and 76 programs that get money from the United Way will have booths set up under the billboard each day, said Kim Morgan, director of marketing and communications for the United Way of Northern Fairfield County.

"I know I-95 raised \$50,000 in five days for Hurricane Katrina victims. I hope their listeners are as generous with their local community," Morgan said.

"He's giving up his life to stay up there 24 hours a day, seven days a week," she added. "I can't believe he's doing this for us."

While neither the radio station nor the United Way have set a goal, Hedley said in Canada he has raised more than \$100,000 while up on the billboard.

The three-week effort is timed with the United Way's campaign to raise funds for programs that deal with issues including

homelessness, mental health and child care. Last year, the United Way of Northern Fairfield County raised \$3 million; this year it's received requests for about \$1 million more than that.

"I'm sure my 16-month-old daughter and wife would prefer if I stayed with them the three weeks, but I think it is important to give back to our community," Hedley said.

The idea, which was in the planning stages for weeks, was introduced to the public Monday morning in a radio interview on the I-95 Morning Show with Ethan and Neil.

Sports announcer Kenny Albert was a guest on the show. A discussion about the National Football League and its involvement with the United Way conveniently led to the funding needs of the local United Way.

Hedley made reference to recent news reports about a pastor in Pennsylvania who climbed to the roof of his church until the public provided 500 turkeys for the needy.

People provided all 500 turkeys within 48 hours, he said. When Hedley suggested someone step up to do something similar for the local United Way, Albert jumped in (to Hedley's apparent shock) to say he should use his trademark move of living on a billboard to raise funds and awareness.

Hedley took him up on the dare, and now the date is set.

A 25-year veteran of radio, Hedley got his first job at age 13 at a radio station in Oshawa, Ontario. He worked there for two years before getting a job at a Toronto station.

In 1994, he climbed his first billboard for the Toronto station to raise money for the needy. In Canada, he usually lived outside for about 30 days over Canadian Thanksgiving in October.

Later, he moved to another radio job in Hartford, where he normally spent four days and nights on a billboard before each Thanksgiving to encourage donations for the city's food bank.

He said it's easier to stay warm than others might think. That's because he's always moving, and talking to people below that are coming to donate. People even offer donations at 2 or 3 in the morning, he said. "While it is my own choice," Hedley added, "there's no guarantee everything is going to go smoothly. However, I've been very fortunate with *this cause before and it's nice to reach out without knowing who you're going to help.*"



The News-Times/David W. Harple

Neil Hedley of radio station WRKI-FM will broadcast from atop a billboard next week to raise money for the United Way of Northern Fairfield County.