

# Boca Raton Amateur Radio Association there in times of need



*Secretary John Cole, Director-at-large Jeff Stahl, President Bruce Ratoff and Vice President Jeff Ronner.  
Photo by Jan Engoren.*

**By: Jan Engoren** Contributing Writer

Unlike Jodie Foster in the 1997 film "Contact," and Will Smith in "Independence Day," who both used amateur, or ham radio, to make contact with extraterrestrials, the members of The Boca Raton Amateur Radio Association (BRARA) use their skills for a much more down-to-earth reason: providing a free communication service and reinforcing the emergency communications system in South Florida.

The group was created to fill the vacuum caused by the loss of the IBM Radio Club, after the company left Boca Raton in 1988. Many current members, including club president, Bruce Ratoff (K04XL) came from IBM.

“We are seasoned, well-peppered garlic hams,” jokes secretary John Cole (N1QFH). “Our goal is to have fun while learning.”

The group meets the first Tuesday of the month at the West Boca Library, 18685 State Rd. 7 and provides a critical public service by providing reliable communications when the normal infrastructure is off-line.

According to Ratoff, there are more than three million amateur radio operators in the world, with the majority of them in Japan and approximately 750,000 in the U.S.

The group attracts those interested in STEM topics, mostly, science and technology, with the majority of them men, although Cole says they are doing outreach to attract more women and will be holding a training session in the fall for women interested in learning about amateur radio.

“Anyone who can read or write can operate a ham radio,” says Ratoff, “although you need to demonstrate a level of competence to obtain a license.” He recalls attending a ham radio conference in Orlando with a 7-year-old speaker.

The club is proud of their efforts to pro-

vide communications during hurricanes and other emergency situations and participates in the SKYWARN program, which trains volunteer weather spotters and public safety personnel for the National Weather Service.

They then transmit information on dangerous weather conditions such as hurricanes, tornadoes and other weather occurrences, to the weather channel.

“The group has bailed out Broward County a number of times,” says Jeff Stahl (RN K4BH), director at large and head of the ARES group, (Amateur Radio Emergency Services), setting up shop in the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) on Broward Blvd. and Pine Island Rd.

After Hurricane Irma last year, the members provided emergency back-up communication services to the Davie EOC. "As a distributed resource and mobile service, we can go where we're needed," he says.

Many ham operators flew to Puerto Rico to get the word out after most traditional communication modes were knocked out after the storm and have worked with FEMA, the Red Cross and Salvation Army, among others.

A big advantage of this type of communication, especially during natural disasters or other emergencies says Ratoff is there is no infrastructure involved, and their equipment can be set up anywhere; in emergency shelters and in the county EOCs.

“It is for these reasons the FCC allows us (hobbyists) to share part of the radio spectrum - because we are a resource,” says Stahl.

On June 23 - 24, the group participated in the national Amateur Radio Field Day exercise at West Delray Park, 10875 W. Atlantic Ave., illustrating science, skill, and service. They operated N4BRF (3E SFL) with the radios on emergency power.

The day demonstrates ham radio's ability to work reliably under any conditions from almost any location

**[CONT. PG 15]**

# **Boca Raton Amateur Radio Association there in times of need**

**[FROM PG 13]** and create an independent communications network. Over 35,000 people from thousands of locations participated in last year's Field Day, according to BRARA.

“The exercise is our chance to show the community what we can do and fosters ham camaraderie, field operations, emergency operating preparedness, and just plain outdoor fun,” says Cole.



Participants come from all over the U.S., Mexico and Canada. One of the goals of the exercise is to make as many contacts as they can, with bonus points awarded for satellite contacts and the use of alternate power sources, such as solar power.

They communicate in various modes (digital, voice or Morse code) with people around the world and even with astronauts aboard the International Space Station, which has a ham radio unit on-board.

What do the members of BRARA want the public to know about them?

“We encourage women to come check us out,” says Cole, a transplant from Maine and a former IT developer. “We strive to be life-long learners, give back to our communities and help out during times of crisis.”

“We are welcoming to all,” he says. ■

*For more information, visit [brara.org](http://brara.org).*