

In it to win it: Sweepstakes addicts living the dream

The Southern California Enterprizers, from left, Mason Fine, Julie Fine, Margaret Sackrison, Jeffery Carman and Ellie Jordan. Brittany Murray — Staff photographer

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When Covina resident Kevin Rader entered his first sweepstakes, he got the same reaction as the lead character in the Oscar-nominated movie “Nebraska.”

“Friends, family — they all pooh-poohed it. They said, ‘Nobody can win. It’s too hard,’” Rader said.

But while in the movie, Bruce Dern’s character was indeed disillusioned, in real life, Rader has proved his naysayers wrong, over and over and over again.

Trips to Hawaii, Japan, Alaska and Mexico, Caribbean cruises, a \$100,000 RV and multiple cars are among the long list of loot Rader has collected since he started entering sweepstakes more than 25 years ago.

Rader is what is known as a sweeper. He spends a couple of hours every night filling out entry forms and addressing envelopes, entering dozens of contests every day.

He isn’t alone. Industry experts believe there may be hundreds of thousands of sweepers just like him.

“The term ‘sweeper’ is someone who enters sweepstakes as a hobby,” said Carolyn Wilman, a Canadian author of two books on the subject. “It’s no different than sitting around with trains or coins or whatever people do for fun, except ours can take you on crazy adventures.”

Wilman, who calls herself “The Contest Queen,” attended her first sweepstakes convention in 2005. A daily sweeper, she occasionally wins big, like her trip to the 2010 Winter Olympics, or a costume party dinner on the Hogwarts set during the London filming of a Harry Potter

adventure.

“You’re always waiting for the call or email,” Wilman said. “I’m probably the only person who looks forward to Mondays because that’s when the mail service starts back up.”

An estimated 55 million Americans enter sweepstakes each year, according to one industry guide. The contests serve a purpose — companies collect personal data on those who enter and generate brand interest. Sweepers, who tend to sign up regardless of the brand, undermine those goals, but not everyone thinks they’re a bad thing.

“The perception is that no one wants them entering and stealing the prizes from customers,” said Jeff Renda of Sweepstakes Pros, a San Jose company that runs sweepstakes nationwide. “But these people are consumers, too. Even if they aren’t specific to the brand, it doesn’t matter in the long run, you just have to make sure you’re hitting the market goals you want.”

Thanks to the Internet, what once took extreme sweepers much time and postage is now as easy as a few clicks of the mouse.

To keep tabs on giveaways, sweepers turn to online or print newsletters. Craig McDaniel, aka “Mr. Sweeepy,” is president and founder of [Sweepstakes Today](#). His free online newsletter boasts 300,000 members, of whom about 3 percent enter between 50 and 100 giveaways each day, he said. Their average age is 45, and three-quarters are female.

“We get a regular following who are virtually addicted to sweepstakes,” McDaniel said. “They’ve replaced buying a lottery ticket with entering contests. That’s how addicted they are.”

McDaniel, who values his lifetime winnings at \$100,000, said most of his site’s “10K Club” members — sweepers who’ve collected prizes worth more than \$10,000 — average 50 daily entries.

“The first thing they do is get their coffee and get started,” McDaniel said. “The downside is while there are a lot of people who take the hobby seriously, a lot will get burned out before they even begin. They think ‘I’m not lucky’ and they quit.”

Rader and sweeper Jeff Carman, of Torrance, got their start the same way — Publishers Clearing House. To enter that contest, you are asked to buy a magazine subscription. They both bought the cheapest one — a newsletter dedicated to sweepstakes. And though they didn’t win the Publishers Clearing House, they both started reading their new magazine and became sweepers for life.

And though they don’t know each other, they have similar advice.

“The first thing you have to remember is this is a hobby. If you win, great. If you don’t, it’s OK,” said Carman, whose winnings include a washer and dryer, refrigerator and a big screen TV.

“I’m not really looking to win anything I can’t afford anyway. It’s just a thrill to see a FedEx or UPS truck pull up and hand you an envelope — that is when you know you are a big winner,” he said.

Rader agreed.

“I do it for fun, for the extra excitement in my life. I can afford everything I win,” he said.

Carman also enjoys the camaraderie. He helps organize a club of sweepers, known as the Southern California Enterprizers, who meet the first Saturday of the month at the Torrance Sizzler.

The group swaps stories about recent wins, chats about upcoming contests and decorate envelopes — a tactic sweepers often use to make their entries stand out in case a contest's winner is selected by hand.

"The people are really nice. It's like any group, whether it's knitting, sewing or this. We have the same interests," said Tarzana resident Julie Fine. "It's fun to win, but it's also fun to get to know the people."

Fine first heard about the group two decades ago while she was on a trip to Hawaii that she won through an L.A. Daily News contest. One of the other contest winners encouraged her to join the club.

In addition to multiple trips to Hawaii, Fine, who enters about 100 sweepstakes a week, has won trips to Australia, Vancouver, the Super Bowl in Atlanta and \$20,000 cash.

Like Carman and Rader, she also has a long list of smaller prizes, such as tickets to Dodgers games and admission to Disneyland.

Though she has had success, Fine says the competition has gotten tougher in recent years, particularly in online contests, where participants don't have to invest in the cost of a stamp.

But Rader isn't worried about the number of participants. He encourages others to take up the hobby, and [offers tips on how to do so](#).

"There's enough for everybody," he said.

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