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Wacky grocery grabbing event debuts at Schnucks

Contestants concocted musical shopping acts to try to win \$10,000.

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He's not completely positive, but Timothy Sparling is pretty confident that rival scientist Dr. Zamboni of Nanotech Inc. is responsible for the death of the miniature pink giraffe that he has been trying to breed as a house pet. In honor of the giraffe, Sparling decorated a shopping cart with its pink pelt and competed for \$10,000 in the first ever National Aisling Competition.

"We have a team of investigators looking into it, but I think he's the guy because he's been trying to develop miniature house pets as well," Sparling said.

Actually, there is no Nanotech Inc., and Sparling, while fond of pink giraffes, has not tried to breed any. The story, however, was part of his persona and added to the creativity in this different, if not bizarre, competition to develop a choreographed routine to find 15 designated items on a grocery list and finish in under three minutes. Twenty-one Columbians who made it past the preliminary round arrived at Schnucks today and competed in the contest, which is part of the new movie "American Shopper."

The movie is a hybrid between fiction and a documentary. The sport of aisling is fake, but the contest in Columbia on Saturday was real, and the winner, Aaron Marchbanks of Columbia, took home a real \$10,000. His wife, Kelly, took home the second place prize and received a \$500 gift certificate to Schnuck's.

Cheered on by excited spectators and the MU Golden Girls, contestants dashed up aisle five and down aisle four, taking items such as granulated sugar and Molly McButter off the shelf and creatively placing them in their cart. All the while, contestants danced around,

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trying to be the funniest and most outrageous.

When it was Sparling's turn, he emerged with his face painted like a pink giraffe's and did his best to make the crowd laugh while searching for the items on the list. In his ratty overalls and beat-up cowboy hat, Sparling threw his arms into the air to get the crowd going and took off. He didn't win but said he'd had fun in the process.

The competition was the brainchild of Hungarian director Tomas Bojtor, who wanted to make a movie about the culture of American consumerism. Katie Mustard, the movie's producer, said that when she learned about the movie, she suggested Columbia as the location.

"We wanted a town that was not too big and not too small and that was also diverse," the Columbia native said. "Columbia is almost a character in the movie, and I knew that people here would participate."

And participate they did. Columbians ranging in age from 10 to 65 took part in the contest and provided some distinct entertainment. Phyllis Ward, 65, donned a blue-and-red jumpsuit and danced her heart out up and down the aisles. Ward, who said she had a blast doing it, was thankful for the opportunity to compete.

"It's a testimony to people my age, and it's important that we can step out into society and say that we're here," Ward said. "Aisling has allowed me to do that, and because of that fact, I've won."

For Victoria Howerton, the aisling competition was good fun as she competed against her 10-year-old daughter, though she did admit she was nervous.

"I feel sick," Howerton said right before her turn. The 38-year-old developed her routine around being a single mother who is trying to make ends meet. After competing, an exasperated Howerton felt good about her performance.

"I think I did better than I thought I was going to," Howerton said.

The producers don't expect the film to be finished until next fall. They plan to submit their work to film festivals all over the country.

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