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Jumping in cold: 2,400 plungers know there's a reason why they're freezing

BY MATTHEW MCGRATH • TOMS RIVER BUREAU • FEBRUARY 24, 2008

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SEASIDE HEIGHTS — Temperatures were hovering just above freezing. The wind was light, but it still stung. The sun was obscured by light-gray clouds. All in all, it was a regular Saturday in February.

Except 2,400 people stripped down to their bathing suits, and charged the Atlantic Ocean's pounding gray-and-white surf to raise money in the 15th Law Enforcement Polar Bear Plunge for Special Olympics New Jersey.

"It's fun, and it's for a good cause," said Matthew Shim, who wore a gorilla mask. "It's warmer in there than it is out here."

The winter air was getting to be too much, so he dove back in the ocean.

"It's like bath water!" Shim said.

The water temperature was 38 degrees, 5 degrees warmer than the air.

This is the second year the plunge was held in Seaside Heights. It previously was held near Jenkinson's Pier in Point Pleasant Beach.

But not everyone shared Shim's enthusiasm for the cold water. Spectators filled the beach, and lined the boardwalk railings, three rows deep, near the Aztec hotel.

"My feet are freezing," said a shivering Jaymie Stein, a former Manalapan resident who now lives in Hoboken, as she was wrapped in a bathrobe, towels and a blanket trying to change into dry clothes. "I feel connected to children with Down syndrome."

The 26-year-old art teacher, who has taken the plunge for four years in row, is waiting to hear from Columbia University and the University of New Mexico regarding her application to study special education.

"It's fun to jump into the ocean," Stein said. "It's for a good cause; that's why I do this."

"All these people help keep the Special Olympics going," said 21-year-old Heather O'Brien, a four-sport Special Olympics athlete. "I'm here to support them, but I won't go in; it's too cold."

The plunge is Special Olympics New Jersey's single-largest fundraiser. As of late Saturday afternoon, an estimated \$800,000 was raised, said Lynn Schindel, a Special Olympic New Jersey spokeswoman. The money will be used to pay to train more than 16,000 Special Olympics athletes in the state, said Andy Johnson, acting director of law-enforcement sponsorship.

This was Johnson's first plunge, not as a participant but as a Special Olympics staff member. He recently retired from the U.S. Air Force. His 5-year-old daughter, Alexis, has special needs and she is starting to train with the program.

"The dedication and passion everyone has," Johnson said, "It's amazing."



Dave McDermott of Long Branch, dressed as Lady Liberty, exits the water Saturday at the Polar Bear Plunge in Seaside Heights to benefit Special Olympics. (STAFF PHOTO: PETER ACKERMAN)

AT A GLANCE

Some 2,400 people raised more than \$800,000 in pledges for Special Olympics New Jersey.

The plungers took a dip in the 38-degree waters of the Atlantic Ocean near Sherman Avenue in Seaside Heights.

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