Ocean plungers go round the clock for Special Olympics Rhode Island

Volunteers raise more than $100,000 at chilly Salty Brine State Beach

NARRAGANSETT, R.I. — The wind chill factor might have been 19 degrees, with the water and air temperatures hovering at a brisk 34, but spirits were high as about 200 volunteers dropped their towels and plunged into the ocean at noon Sunday at the Salty Brine State Beach.

And for five Super Plungers it represented their 24th dip in 24 hours to raise money for the Special Olympics Rhode Island.

“This literally was the coldest year,” said Erica Vieira, whose German shepherd, Maxwell, joined her in the ocean. The wind chill and snow melt combined to make things just a little more icy, said Vieira, who had been dreading it all winter.

Vieira, a sergeant at the University of Rhode Island, dressed as a scarecrow, Maxwell as a lion, complete with a golden mane. It was their eighth plunge.

“I say I’m not going in unless I raise $1,000,” Vieira said. This year, she brought in $1,075.

In all, volunteers raised more than $100,000, with $42,000 coming from the super plungers alone, according to Tracy Garabedian, director of development for Special Olympics Rhode Island. One Special Olympic athlete, 35-year-old Michael Walter, who competes in golf and bowling, ranked as the second highest fundraiser. Walter, 1 of 25 or so athletes to participate, alone collected more than $8,000.

It marked Richmond Police Chief Elwood Johnson's third year as a super plunger. The event kicked off Saturday at 1 p.m. when about 200 high school students joined them for their first plunge. After that, the five men took a dip once every hour. In addition to Johnson, the group included Cranston Officer Eric Ledere, Woonsocket Firefighter Rick LeBreche, and Special Olympic volunteers, Jim Cummings and Bo Mathews, both parents of Special Olympic athletes.

The super plungers faced the extra challenge of low tide, which required them to head 50 to 75 feet out into the water before they could even dive in, Johnson said.

“Why can’t this be high tide?” Johnson recalled thinking. Then, just as the swimmers got comfortable back on dry land, on the cold, jet black night, they'd have to put their wet trunks back on and head out in to the water.

“Once the sun comes up, you get a second wind,” Johnson said. Seals joined them swimming in the channel.

Johnson was happy to celebrate at George's of Galilee restaurant afterward. "I'm in a building, and I don't have to get back in the water till June," Johnson said.

What makes them do it? "We are inspired by what we see," Johnson said of the athletes' dedication and relentless spirit in overcoming challenge. "We're trying to promote tolerance and acceptance for all people."

More than 300 police, firefighters and law enforcement officials from over 40 state agencies took part in last year’s Torch Run for the Special Olympics Rhode Island State Summer Games. Runners depart from the State House and make their way to Meade Stadium at URI, carrying the “Flame of Hope” throughout Rhode Island to the SORI State Summer Games opening ceremonics.

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