

Taking the plunge

Hundreds dash into frigid ocean for annual event

By Karen Dandurant

news@seacoastonline.com

HAMPTON — The 19th annual Penguin Plunge brought out corporate teams, teams of friends and single participants but what they had in common were crazy costumes and a desire to help raise money for Special Olympics of New Hampshire.

Added to Saturday's High School Penguin Plunge, Sunday's plunge brought the total raised to more than a half-million dollars. Mary Conroy, president of SONH said over the 19 years, more than \$8 million has been raised to support the athletes of Special Olympics.

Saturday's high school plunge drew 370 participants from 24 high schools and raised just shy of \$130,000. Sunday's plunge saw 409 plungers, and raised

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\$388,918, an average of \$951 per plunger.

"This is a fun, extreme event that benefits great people," said Conroy. "I think the efforts of our plungers, in raising money and doing what they do here are unparalleled.

The teams go all out and have great names like the Flocking Irish, The Frozen Sections, Freezer Burnt, and the Glorious Ladies of Coca-Cola. Some of the Coca-Cola "ladies" sported a lot of facial hair under their bouffant wigs, prompting WOKQ announcer Mark Ericson to speculate that Coke put hair on their workers' chests.

Always strong supporters, WMUR'S Mike Haddad and Kevin Skarupa once again took the plunge. They were joined

this year by Gov. Chris Sununu, who took a head-first dive into the water.

"This is the epitome of 603 Pride here today," said a wet and cold, but full of spirit Sununu, after his plunge. "It was awesome."

Sununu said the fact that the event draws thousands of participants, who jump in the water no matter how cold the water or the February day to raise awareness speaks to the quality of the state's residents.

"I like being here to talk with the people and hear from them what else we should be doing in our state," said Sununu. "My family owns Waterville Valley resort, and we have hosted Special Olympics proudly for decades. As for the water ... I grew up in New Hampshire. Cold water does not bother me."

It didn't seem to bother anyone else too much either.

Portsmouth resident Nancy Clayburgh watched her son Michael race into the water. Michael, 28, has Down syndrome and has been a Special Olympic athlete for most of his life.

"This is year 10 for him taking part in the Penguin Plunge," said Clayburgh. "Last year he broke his back skiing and couldn't do it. He was so disappointed and couldn't wait to get back out there this year."

Clayburgh said Special Olympics changes the lives of a person with disabilities.

"It gives them the opportunity to be competitive and to make lifelong friends. For the parents, it's a lot of fun and we

make a lot of friends, too."

Members of the Rochester Social Club took the plunge. Jake Beal, president of the community service club, said half of the money their team raised will go directly to the Rochester-based Monarch School's SO team.

Beal has done the event for five years and this year recruited members of the new social club.

"My advice?" he said. "They had better go all in."

Di Towle, a member of Beal's team, was getting ready for her first plunge.

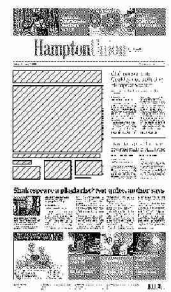
"Jake brought the idea to us at one of our meetings," said Towle. "I said - why not? It's for a great cause."

Twelve staff members of the Monarch School took part in the event. Jenna Zarnowski leads the school Special Olympics team and is also head coach for SONH, and New Hampshire USA coach for Special Olympics.

"We love the event and some of the money does come to our school," said Zarnowski. "We love what it does for our athletes, and just the whole concept of Special Olympics."

Plunging for all 19 of the event's years is the by now well-known "Captain Plunger" aka Bill Jones of Bedford.

"I have twins who are now 26, and are disabled," said Captain Plunger. "I have been involved with Special Olympics for 28 years. My daughter Megan has done this now for six years, with the Bedford Bobcats. It's a great cause for a great organization."





Gov. Chris Sununu is among the Penguin Plunge swimmers Sunday at Hampton Beach for Special Olympics. [DARYL CARLSON/FOSTERS.COM]



Students in the Winnacunnet High School MCJROTC program run into the ocean as the last wave of plungers during the annual High School Plunge at Hampton Beach to benefit the Special Olympics of New Hampshire. [IOANNA RAPTIS/SEACOASTONLINE]



Waves of partakers make their way in and out of the icy Atlantic while participating in the 19th annual Penguin Plunge for Special Olympics New Hampshire, at Hampton Beach State Park in Hampton Sunday.

[DARYL CARLSON/FOSTERS.COM]