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Three hundred jump in Detroit River for Polar Plunge

By Jennie Miller
C & G Staff Writer

DETROIT — Despite freezing temperatures, 325 local residents jumped in the icy Detroit River Feb. 27 as part of the annual Polar Plunge, tripling the amount of money raised in previous years for the Special Olympics of Michigan.

The event, part of the Law Enforcement Torch Run, brought in an estimated \$123,000 for the organization that allows for some 17,000 individuals with special needs to participate and compete in sporting events.

A hole was cut out of the ice in the harbor outside The Roostertail, with ladders set up against the docks for plungers to climb down and leap into the frigid waters. Members of the Detroit Police Department and the Wayne County Sheriff's Department's Dive Team wore dry suits and were stationed in and out of the water to assist people as they jumped in, then frantically climbed out.

A parade of plungers, all decked out in crazy costumes as per tradition, snaked through the inside of The Roostertail and out into the bitter cold, awaiting their turn to jump.

Anxious jumpers walked down the docks as if they were walking the plank, slowly approached their fate.

“Walking down the plank is — you’re totally nervous and you get anxious because

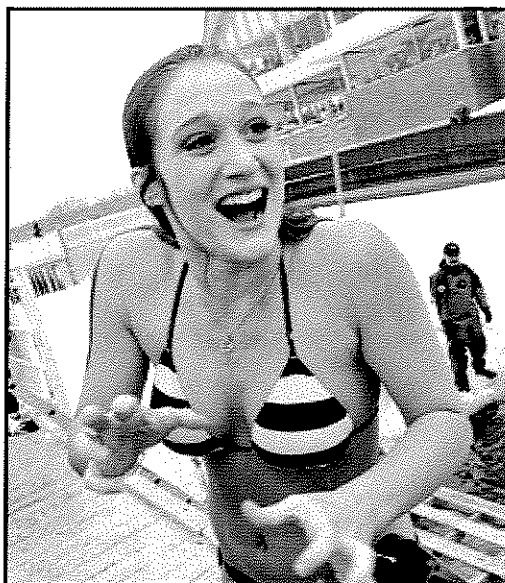


Photo by Deb Jacques
Emily Morgan, a senior at Lawrence Technological Institute, shivers as she climbs out of the icy waters of the Detroit River Feb. 27, having taken part in the Law Enforcement Torch Run Polar Plunge, a benefit for Special Olympics.



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you're afraid to jump in, and once you jump in it's a complete and total shock to the system, and you try to scurry out of the water as fast as you can, and after that it's not so bad," said Shawn Rowley, deputy chief of the Southfield Police Department, who plunged for the fourth time, dressed this year as Goldilocks, with his teammates outfitted as The Three Bears. "It's an opportunity for a wide variety of people to get in crazy costumes and do something out of the ordinary and ... raise money for Special Olympics."

Kevin Martin, of Roseville, was watching as his older brother took part in the plunge. While he thought his brother was "nuts" for jumping in the ice-cold water, Martin said once he's old enough, he wants to plunge, too.

"(It'll be) cold, but I think they'll feel good because they're helping out the Special Olympics," Martin said.

Paul Orlando of Clinton Township watched as his wife, dressed as a starfish, readied herself for the plunge.

"My wife is jumping in the river," Orlando said with a laugh, almost in disbelief. "It's going to be cold. It doesn't look like it's fun. She was fine on the way here, but when we pulled up in the parking lot she started to get a little more nervous. ... That's got to be freezing."

Denise Lazorka of Westland served as a volunteer for the event, passing out towels as participants climbed out of the frigid waters.

"(This is) a great event for the children and a great cause," Lazorka said, adding, "I'm not crazy enough (to do it). I have a brother-in-law that's going to, so we're here to support him. We're towel holders, so that's an important job. I think they're crazy."

Emily Karr of Livonia and Christy Hamlin of Beverly Hills teamed up to jump in the river for their first Plunge.

"We want to jump and support the Special Olympics," Hamlin said.

"There's so many people — I didn't think there'd be this many people here, and I keep hearing that it's even colder than it looks," Karr said as the duo waited in the long line of jumpers.

"The people coming out don't look miserable, so we're excited about that," Hamlin said.

Hot tubs were set up for plungers to warm up in following their icy stint, and after drying off and changing, participants were invited to join in a feast provided by the Roostertail and made possible by event sponsors.

Oakland County Sheriff Michael Bouchard served as a guest judge for the costume competition, in which Bill Boland of Farmington Hills, dressed as a bride, took home the top prize.

The Detroit Polar Plunge is one of 19 taking place this month throughout Michigan for the Law Enforcement Torch Run, a group of police officers and corrections personnel committed to raising funds and awareness for the organization.

Rowley has been volunteering with the Special Olympics since his days in college.

“From that day forward, it left an imprint on my memory and my heart,” he said. “It’s a real treat working with the young athletes. They just put forth such a great effort and get such a great reward from what they do. It’s something that you never forget.”

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