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Valentine fund-raiser sees 300 take the icy plunge

Over \$100,000 raised to fight ALS

BY NICK MALFITANO



Over 300 participants of the inaugural Valentine Plunge fund-raiser were ready to jump into the freezing ocean waters at Seawatch Beach in a show of support for the battle against ALS.

Photo by LAUREN PARKER,
THE COAST STAR

MANASQUAN — This past Saturday, approximately 300 people at the inaugural Valentine Plunge fund-raiser jumped into the sub-freezing ocean waters as a show of support in the fight against Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis [ALS], while approximately 500 supporters cheered them on.

Jim O'Neill, owner of O'Neill's Bar, Grill and Guesthouse in Manasquan and the event organizer, said that the plunge "was wonderful, it was a great event ... I'm still getting phone calls [from people interested in donating to the plunge]."

Over \$100,000 was raised toward supporting individuals with ALS and their families, in an effort to improve their quality of life. In all, approximately 60 families will benefit from the generosity of those attending the Valentine Plunge.

ALS is also known as Lou Gehrig's disease, after the New York Yankees' first baseman [1923 to 1939] who died of the disease in 1941.

ALS is an incurable, fatal neuromuscular disease characterized by progressive muscle weakness, resulting in paralysis. The disease attacks nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord. Motor neurons, which control the movement of voluntary muscles, deteriorate and eventually die. When the motor neurons die, the brain can no longer initiate and control muscle movement. Because muscles no longer receive the messages they need in order to function, they gradually weaken and deteriorate.

Mr. O'Neill's family joined the battle against the disease when his brother, Tim, was diagnosed with ALS in 2004.

In the interim, Jim O'Neill has dedicated many hours and efforts to fund raise for individuals with the disease, as well as their families.

Participants were required to raise at least \$100 in donations, which included a \$25 registration fee. Depending on the amount of money raised per individual, attendees were eligible to receive prizes including t-shirts, winter skull caps, beach towels, hooded windbreakers, robes and custom jackets, all bearing the Valentine Plunge logo. Prizes were awarded to the individual raising the most amount of money, the largest team and for the best costume.

"It was a tremendous response ... it's not like a triathlon, you don't have to be a world-class athlete to do this and make a difference," said Mr. O'Neill.

In reference to the spirit of the event organizers, attendee Terry Magovern stated, "their enthusiasm is infectious ... it's a fun, family event."

Those participating in the plunge were eligible to do so individually or as part of a team, both of which were well-represented, according to Mr. O'Neill.

Mr. Magovern raised the largest amount of money for an individual plunger, tallying over \$17,000 in donations. Mr. Magovern had previously raised funds for the Joan Dancy and People with ALS [PALS] support group, and felt that "this gave a little extra incentive to people to raise money for the benefit."

Winning the award for largest team was the Broadway Bar & Grill in Point Pleasant Beach with 26 members, while the award for best costume went to Team Titanic, whose members were attired in disposable pants, as well as men's and women's formal wear, organizers said. Other teams included the Kesler Crazies and Wall Street Idiots, who actually came down from New York City for the event this past weekend.

Mr. O'Neill was very pleased with the fund-raiser, and anticipates the plunge becoming a yearly occasion. "When you get this kind of support, it has to be [an annual event]." Mr. O'Neill added that next year, the group is seeking to double both attendance and the amount of money raised for individuals and their families battling ALS.

In addition, the event organizer and local restaurant owner wanted to thank all attendees and borough residents, as well. "This is just a great community, and people certainly answered the bell on this one," said Mr. O'Neill.

Mr. Magovern also extended his gratitude to the town. "I would like to thank the community of Manasquan, they've really jumped behind the event. . . everyone was there for the right reason."