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Hundreds make a splash against ALS at Valentine's Day event

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**David McNelis, of Toms River and diagnosed with ALS for 12 years, is surrounded by friends and family during the Valentine's Day Plunge to raise funds for local people with ALS.
(STAFF PHOTO: SHAWN HUBER)**

As 15 married couples stood on the Main Beach in Manasquan to renew their vows, taking the plunge again could never be translated so literally.

No more than a minute later did the brides, who donned veils, the grooms, who wore tuxedo T-shirts, and more than 400 others make a mad dash for the frigid waters of the Atlantic Ocean - a mere 39 degrees.

"This gives cold feet a whole new meaning for a good cause," said Myrna Bethke, a minister from the United Methodist Church of Red Bank who led the vow renewal ceremony.

The "plungers," as they are called, participated in the third annual Valentine Plunge this afternoon to benefit the Joan Dancy and PALS Foundation and staytough.fightHARD Foundation. The organizations raise money for ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease, an illness that affects nerve cells in the spinal cord and brain, leading to muscle paralysis.

Participants were asked to raise a minimum of \$100 dollars through pledges and donations. The 2008 Valentine Plunge raised \$117,000, which directly benefits local patients and families in Monmouth and Ocean counties for equipment and medical expenses. The 2009 plunge is expected to raise even more money than last year, said Kathy Valentino, social worker for Joan Dancy and PALS.

"I guess the third time is a charm. There are no waves and the water is ice cold, but it feels great when you know you're doing it for the right cause," said Sean Magovern, president and executive director of Joan Dancy and PALS and the mastermind behind Team Renewal.

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The plunge could easily be mistaken for a Halloween party on the beach, as some participants dressed in costumes ranging from superheroes and Santa Claus to mice and cupid himself.

Brothers Matt, Dan and Dave Jordan, all of Point Pleasant, dressed as vikings for the event because they are “warriors fighting for the cure.” Dave said his wife’s mother died from ALS and the couple wanted to help support the cause.

Rob and Kim Bongiorno of Avon were one of the couples who renewed their vows before taking the plunge. Wearing leggings, his tuxedo shirt and Valentine’s Day boxers, Rob said the outpour and support from the community “is tremendous.”

“We’re doing it for Sean (Magovern) and ALS. It’s a great cause,” Rob said.

Magovern’s father, Terry, founded Joan Dancy and PALS in 2006 after his then-fiance, Joan Dancy, died of ALS. Terry unexpectedly died in July 2007, leaving the foundation in the hands of his son.

“The interesting thing is that people are giving from the goodness of their hearts,” said Jim O’Toole of the Joan Dancy and PALS Foundation. “It’s all love. It’s all out of their hearts.”

