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## Taking the plunge for a good cause

BY ALENA COMPETELLO



**Three crazy cupids were among the nearly 400 people who jumped into the 40-degree water off Manasquan's beachfront Saturday to raise money for local ALS patients at the third annual Valentine Plunge.**

**Photo by SUEANNE GOSS,  
STAR NEWS GROUP**

**MANASQUAN** — The bitterly cold wind that whipped across the Main Street beachfront in Manasquan on Saturday was no match for the nearly 400 swimsuit-clad people who had warmth in their hearts despite the winter chill.

These hundreds of brave souls took a plunge into the Atlantic Ocean on Valentine's Day in support of members of the Monmouth and Ocean county communities suffering from Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis [ALS], also known as Lou Gehrig's disease.

It was the third annual Valentine Plunge, organized by the Joan Dancy & PALS [People With ALS] Support Group and the staytough.fightHARD organization.

After Tim O'Neill, of Manasquan, and Joan Dancy, of Middletown, succumbed to this horrible disease, their loved ones, Manasquan restaurant owner Jim O'Neill, of staytough.fightHARD, and PALS founder Terry Magovern, formerly of Belmar and Rumson, started this annual event in 2007 to help make a difference in the lives of local families battling this fatal disease.

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This year's plunge was held in honor of Tim O'Neill, Joan Dancy and Terry Magovern, who died shortly after founding the plunge. Mr. Magovern's son, Avon resident Sean Magovern, currently serves as president and executive director of Joan Dancy & PALS, the organization his father started in memory of his fiancée, Ms. Dancy, who was afflicted with ALS.

"We formed the plunge because you don't have to be a star athlete or a golfer to participate," Mr. O'Neill, Tim's brother, said.

"We had every shape, size, color and creed [take the plunge]," he noted, adding that plunge participants on Saturday ranged in age from 11 to 65.

"Anybody can plunge, and when you put a cause like this on it," it's very special, he said.

There were plenty of smiles — and some interesting costumes — at this year's plunge. A minister was also on hand as 30

couples, the women dressed in veils and their husbands in tuxedo T-shirts, renewed their vows on the beach.

Ellen and Michael Seebeck, of Belmar, were among the couples renewing their vows on Valentine's Day, as was Sean Magovern and his wife Andrea, a board of education member in Avon.

"We're taking the plunge again" after 13 years of marriage, Mrs. Seebeck laughed.

In order to participate in the event, each plunger was required to raise \$100 in donations. Charlene Masella, of the Rumson area, raised \$100, and then some. She won the prize for most money raised by an individual by donating \$6,676 to the cause, Mr. O'Neill reported.

Brock Burger raised the largest amount of money for an individual under 18, with \$3,470.

Prizes were also awarded for the most creative individual, the most creative team and the largest team.

The largest team was Team Tim, which was 47 plungers strong, and included Mr. O'Neill and his relatives.

Also among the teams was Team V-Diddy, who took the plunge in honor of Valarie Pretre, a Middletown resident who was diagnosed with ALS one and one-half years ago, her daughter, Kristin Borbely said. Mrs. Borbely's husband, Scott, took the plunge as an individual last year.

"I was really moved by it," Mrs. Borbely said, "and a lot of our friends and family are joining in," including Mrs. Borbely's sister, Lauren Pretre.

"Last year, I realized how fun it is," Mr. Borbely said. "It's really about support [for people with ALS]. It's for a good cause. It's about fun and making good memories."

Also among the plungers were Mrs. Dancy's sons, Frank Devino and Brad Dancy and close family friend Ginger Kolb and her son Nicholas, all from Middletown.

"When you see the smiles on people's faces [when they come out of the water], you're going to want to do it next year," Mr. Devino said.

Team Muffin was formed in honor of Ann "Muffin" Balbach, of Bay Head, by her granddaughter, Chrissy Mills. The group, Ms. Mills said, had grown from 10 to 15 people since last year's plunge.

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“We’re trying to raise money for Muffin,” team member Tom Tonkovich said.

When the clock stationed next to the Main Street lifeguard stand wound down to zero at approximately noon on Saturday, the plungers rushed down the beach and into the icy ocean.

Cindy McCann and Sue Monahan, of Manasquan, took the plunge and then hurried back to their friends on the beach, who had towels in hand.

“My toes are numb,” Ms. McCann said.

“Feel the love,” Ms. Monahan shouted.

Jean Mattos, of Lavallette, and Nance and Rick Ghidella, of Point Pleasant, also took the plunge.

“This is our first time,” Ms. Mattos said, “but it’s not going to be our last!”

Mr. O’Neill, owner of O’Neill’s Bar & Grill in Manasquan, was among the plungers on Sunday.

“It’s a cold baptism,” he said. “It’s very refreshing, you get all pumped up.”

“The hard part isn’t going in, it’s coming out,” he added.

This year’s plunge raised approximately \$135,000 as of Tuesday afternoon, and more money was still rolling in, Mr. O’Neill said.

The \$135,000 raised by plungers this year far surpassed last year’s \$117,000. Add to this year’s total another \$175,000 raised by local Saker ShopRite stores during their “Strike Out ALS” campaign, which included matching funds of over \$55,000 from Saker ShopRite.

But it is not the money that is donated to Joan Dancy & PALS and the staytough.fightHARD Foundation that makes the plunge meaningful, Mr. Magovern said.

“It’s the awareness and the enthusiasm of the community toward the event that is so exciting,” he noted. “Everyone that participates gets someone else in their community of friends hooked on the cause. It’s really exciting to see people get their friends involved.”

“A very big part of what we do is to make sure the community is aware and engaged,” Mr. Magovern remarked. “Both organizations are committed to quality of life issues for patients with ALS in the Monmouth and Ocean county areas.”

Joan Dancy & PALS is an all-volunteer foundation, with only two salaried employees — Patricia Schaeffer, a registered nurse, and Kathy Valentino, a licensed clinical social worker — who visit with patients at their homes, track their progress and assess any needs the patients have.

Ms. Valentino joined the cause one- and one-half years ago, she said.

“I just love it,” Ms. Valentino said. “I was meant to do this. I was driven to work with ALS patients.”

Jim O’Toole, also of Joan Dancy & PALS, explained that many people with ALS and their caretakers do not know where to turn for support.

“People have said to me, ‘I can’t believe you exist,’” Ms. Valentino said. “People never need to feel that alone.”

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She recalled one patient attending a support group who said, “I knew we would fight this disease as a family — I just didn’t know how big that family would be.”

Joan Dancy & PALS deals with “both sides of the coin,” Mr. Magovern explained, helping patients and their families face the financial difficulties of ALS, as well as providing emotional support.

Communication is “an incredible resource for these people,” Mr. Magovern commented.

Currently, Joan Dancy & PALS tracks and assists about 65 ALS patients in the area, Mr. Magovern reported.

“ALS is an interesting disease, because there is no real test for it ... and the symptoms mirror other neuro-muscular diseases in the early phase,” he said.

As a result, many times patients with ALS are misdiagnosed until very far into the progression of the disease, he said.

“When we started the organization, we quickly got a blast of patients,” Mr. Magovern explained. “Each and every year, the number [of people with ALS] we can identify rises, not because the number of cases is on the rise, but because the profile of our organization is rising, so it is easier for people who have ALS to find us.”

“Three years ago we were a fledgling organization,” he continued. Today, patients can “readily identify us and call us” and know that we are out there, he said.

This year’s plunge was especially poignant, he said, because the ALS community recently lost two of its members — Sean Scott, one of the leading researchers with Massachusetts-based ALS TDI, the world’s largest ALS research center, and Kerrie Guibord, of Point Pleasant.

Ms. Guibord lost her battle with ALS last Thursday night, Mr. Magovern reported.

“Her family, sister and brother were on our organizing committee from our very first plunge,” Mr. Magovern remarked. “She was an incredibly vibrant and active woman ... It hit the group hard. We lost a patient in our area, but we also lost somebody who was just so tied to the event. It was pretty powerful.”

The Valentine Plunge is “like a stone rolling down the hill,” Mr. Magovern said. Plungers invite their friends to watch them jump in the ocean, and their friends decide to take the plunge themselves the next year, he said.

“It puts the fun in fund-raising,” he said. “That was my father’s catch phrase. You don’t want to ask people to come out and give money and get nothing for it. We get people to come out and have some fun.”