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It's a Lifesaver

BY ALEX BIESE, STAFF WRITER

It's not uncommon to find several hundred people crowded onto Manasquan's beaches during the warm days of summer. What is more surprising is finding the same volume of visitors at the Shore on a Saturday morning in February. However, the sizable crowd was at the beach and in the water for a good cause.

On Feb. 10, the first annual Valentine Plunge was held at Manasquan's Seawatch Beach. The event, where between 300 and 400 people ran into the ocean at 11 a.m., raised more than \$100,000 for people suffering from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, a neurodegenerative disease also known as ALS or Lou Gehrig's Disease, said organizer Jim O'Neill.

The money raised went to benefit staytough.fightHARD and The Joan Dancy and People with ALS (PALS) Support Group, two local organizations committed to improving the quality of life for ALS patients and their families.

While the two groups originally expected to raise \$40,000 with their inaugural plunge, O'Neill said they had passed the \$70,000 mark before Saturday morning.

"I think, for our first year, this is a tremendous turnout," said O'Neill, a Manasquan resident and trustee with staytough.fightHARD.

"How many people do we have here today, in the freezing cold, ready to jump in the water for their neighbors?" said PALS founder and Rumson resident Terry Magovern.

"It just goes to show you, when the community believes in something, they pull together," he said.

Along with those who had raised a minimum of \$100, including a \$25 registration fee, to jump into the water, there were hundreds of spectators on the beach. Some participants even came in costumes, including tuxedos, ball gowns and a Superman outfit.

Point Pleasant resident Bob Picton, 31, a member of the 25-person team from Point Pleasant Beach's Broadway Bar and Grill that took the plunge, came dressed as Winnie the Pooh.

"I don't know what the dictionary definition of community is," Magovern said. "There are places where people live, but this is a community. Manasquan is a community where people support other people."

Edison resident Jim Jordan, a member of the Wall Street Idiots team, said the event was for "a great cause. It's a great way to get a bunch of freezing people on the beach in the middle of January."

"It was a great success," said Brick resident Patrick Kesler, who described himself and his wife, Katie, as "first-time plungers."

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“It raised a lot of money for a good cause, and we can’t wait until next year,” he said.

O’Neill said staytough.fightHARD was founded a year ago to aid his younger brother, Timothy O’Neill Sr., 46, who was diagnosed with ALS in 2004.

Wall resident and PALS Executive Director Craig Sulaitis said the support group was started about a year ago in memory of Middletown resident Joan Dancy, who died of ALS in 2005. The group currently supports approximately 60 families in Monmouth and Ocean counties, providing them with aid through nursing services, in-home aides, supplies and funds, Sulaitis said.

The support group is based at Riverview Medical Center, Red Bank, and Magovern, who was Joan Dancy’s fiance, said ALS patients get “great solace and comfort in being able to come to these support-group meetings.”

With the flat ocean and calm winds on Feb. 10, Magovern said, “I think Joan gave us a beautiful day.”

When asked if he hoped the Valentine Plunge would become a yearly tradition, O’Neill said, “It will be, there’s no hoping.”

“For as long as I live, this event will go on,” O’Neill said.