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CHERYL SENTER PHOTO

Dressed as a bride, Nicole Ferrante of Derry exits quickly after a dip in the ocean Sunday for the 14th annual Penguin Plunge at Hampton Beach.

Plunge raises \$500K

Local event boosts Special Olympics

BY JOEY CRESTA
jcresta@seacoastonline.com

HAMPTON — Normally, the sight of dozens of brides tossing themselves into the ocean would be a cause for concern, but not on Sunday.

That's because it was the 14th annual Penguin Plunge at Hampton Beach, a fund-raiser for Special Olympics New Hampshire. The theme this year was "Going to the Chapel," and many teams dressed the part. Team members from



CHERYL SENTER PHOTO



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Debbie Drouin of Penacook runs out of the water after dipping into the ocean Sunday at the 14th annual Penguin Plunge at Hampton Beach. The theme for this year's fund-raiser was "Going to the Chapel."

PLUNGE: Event benefits Special Olympics

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Measured Progress in Dover came as an entire wedding: bride, groom, flowers, limousine and even a prenuptial agreement were present.

"Creative folks here," said Dee Wilson, who was dressed as the bride's bouquet.

"Less is more" was the mantra of Trevor Hunt of Jaffrey, whose imitation of a groom involved a bow tie, cuffs, a Speedo and dress shoes.

"The water's actually a little bit warmer than the air," he said.

Ashley Lawson, development coordinator with the Special Olympics, said that while only 644 people participated this year, compared to more than 700 last year, the fund-raising effort was just as impressive.

She said Sunday's plunge participants raised \$493,475

for the Special Olympics. The average amount raised was \$765, while organizers require only \$350 per participant.

"I think that totally speaks to the kind of people who come to this event," she said. "You can't beat the dedicated donors who are willing to jump in the water."

The water was about 40 degrees and the air temperature was in the 20s as a dusting of snow fell while three waves of participants lined up on the sands of Hampton Beach. Before rushing into the water, participants did what they could to stay warm, whether it was tossing a football around or doing some jumping jacks.

Portsmouth's Michael Clayburgh, who has Down syndrome and participates in Special Olympics, described a chaotic scene as wave after wave of plungers pushed the crowd closer to the water.

Clayburgh participated with Portsmouth City Councilor Bob Lister, who has taken the plunge every year since its inception, and Anthony Hibble of New Castle, who suffers from seizures and also competes in Special Olympics.

"This year, I raised \$1,351," Hibble said. "I broke my old record."

Jim Tufts, Exeter High School's physical education teacher who coaches Clayburgh and others on the Special Olympics track and field team, said the best thing about the Penguin Plunge is "the camaraderie."

"You run down the beach and you think, 'This is for the kids,'" he said.

Fred Bowden, a Kittery, Maine, resident who works with special education students in the Epping School District, shared a similar perspective.

"We're in it for the children. Obviously, we're not in it for the cold," he said.

Kerry Poliquin, the "flock leader" for a fund-raising team from Dover's Community Partners, an area agency providing behavioral health and developmental services, said the annual event helps offset the cost of fees and equipment needed to participate in Special Olympics.

"It supports all the people that we serve on a daily basis who want to participate in the Special Olympics," she said, noting the Community Partners team raised \$7,000 this year.

Combined with the effort on Saturday, when 475 participants from 45 high schools took the High School Plunge, the weekend's events raised a total of \$665,975 for Special Olympics, according to Lawson.