

WNY Special Olympics benefits from frigid dip in Lake Erie

BY ALICE GERARD

Senior Contributing Writer

The afternoon of Dec. 6 was cold and windy and the water was a chilly 45 degrees when a group of Grand Island High School students, teachers and friends plunged into Lake Erie at Woodlawn Beach in Hamburg.



Polar plunges have a long history. The first polar plunge was recorded as being held in 1904 in Boston. The event continues as a tradition. In Canada, people like to plunge in icy waters to celebrate the start of a new year. In the U.S., polar bear plunges are often done as fundraisers for charitable organizations.

Participants in this year's Polar Plunge got cold and wet to raise money for the Special Olympics in Western New York, as well as for unified sports. Altogether, the Grand Island team raised \$8,141.

This year's Polar Plunge took place over the span of two days. On Dec. 6, the "Cool Schools" event was held with 800 participants from 21 Western New York schools, and on Dec. 7, 1,000 participants took the plunge. Accord-

ing to WGRZ-TV's website, more than \$500,000 was raised for Special Olympics in Western New York during the two-day event.

At the Board of Education meeting held Dec. 9 at Kaegebein Elementary School, Grand Island Assistant Principal Adam Hernandez recognized Grand Island High School student Chase Giambra for his fundraising efforts.

"Chase is a student of ours at the high school, in Mrs. Simpson's class," Hernandez said. "Chase was instrumental in our fundraising efforts for the polar plunge this year. He was a true leader of our team. Chase even convinced Mom (Michelle Giambra) to bring gallons of hot chocolate and the best Oreo snowmen anyone had ever eaten. Athletes



Above, Grand Island Central School District's Polar Plunge team, with friend Plungie (the bear). • Top, left: In costume and ready for the plunge. (Photos by Alice Gerard)

like Chase are the reason why the polar plunge exists, why Special Olympics exists. We are proud of Chase and the accomplishments he has made.

"Chase is wearing the gear from the Polar Plunge. If you raised \$125 - and I think Chase raised much more than that - you got the good hoodie from the Po-

lar Plunge. It's the kind of event where everyone goes into that water when it's so cold. It's very, very cold, but everybody's sharing that sort of situation together, and that sort of inclusiveness is what it's all about. Although it's very cold, and everyone's shivering at the end a bit, we all do that together, and we all show that we are one group of

people who have the same goals. So, it was fantastic."

Grand Island Central School District Superintendent Dr. Brian Graham read a letter from Brian Albert, a special education teacher at the high school, who was unable to attend the meeting.

"Thank you, all, for your support of our efforts to raise money for Special Olympics in Western New York," Albert wrote. "The most exciting thing about this year's crew is how inclusive the team was able to be. Our team has very much become a hive: a series of individuals, all working independently towards a common goal. A lot of the people who worked to make this successful are people whose names do not always appear on the roster. They work behind the scenes because they have a reason to support this cause. It doesn't stop there. Ask the kids why they are plunging. Most of them will tell you about someone they know: a relative, a classmate or a neighbor. Ask others why they are plunging, and they will all talk about an idea that they want to live in a world that is inclusive."

"I am thrilled that the Polar Plunge was such a success," Board of Education Trustee Roger Broecker said.

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