

New Year's Day plunge benefits local charities

ASBURY PARK -- Gene Boyle celebrated a cold New Year's Day by charging into the ocean.

Even stranger, this year marked the fifth time the 57-year-old did so on the first day of a new year.

The Howell resident joined hundreds who did the same thing, despite a predicted high temperature of just 34 degrees, according to the National Weather Service in Mount Holly.

I expected the water to be cold and just as invigorating as it was," said Boyle, who completely submerged himself under the water and afterward donned a pink robe to warm up in Convention Hall on the city's boardwalk.

Boyle and his fellow plungers were participants in the 11th annual Sons of Ireland Polar Bear Plunge, a major fundraising event that has raised \$350,000 for local charities over the years. The plunge regularly draws hundreds of participants and thousands of spectators of all ages from throughout the state, according to organizers.

It was just participation in something cool with a bunch of people," said Boyle, who estimated he ran roughly 20 to 30 yards through low-tide waters before he reached enough of a depth to dive underwater.

A small group of alumni from Christian Brothers Academy in the Lincroft section of Middletown began the plunge in 2003. Since then, the event has significantly grown and benefited more than 15 charities, including The 9/11 Fund for the Education of Monmouth County Children, Clean Ocean Action, and Big Brothers Big Sisters of Monmouth and Middlesex Counties among others, according to the news release.

When we first started the plunge, it was only 15 of us that did it in Sea Bright," said Sean Clifford, 42, of Rumson. Clifford is a co-founder of the Sons of Ireland, a group of Monmouth County residents formed in 2002 to raise money for the county's charities. "(We) just decided to start a tradition with a group of friends and we decided to do it on New Year's Day."

Participants and spectators began gathering around 10 a.m. Wednesday inside the warm confines of Convention Hall, where some drank beer, wine and mixed drinks as they heard bands play. By 12:30 p.m., they started their march down the building's steps onto the beach, where they stripped down to bathing suits, formed a crowd between two jetties and took the plunge.

"It's just grown by word-of-mouth," Clifford said. "A lot of people just like to come back and make it a part of their New Year's Day tradition."

This year, the plunge broke its own records, as it garnered 280 pre-registered participants and \$36,000 by 8 a.m. Wednesday, said Christine Burke Eskwitt, a spokeswoman for the Sons of Ireland. She expected the number of attendees to double and the raised money to clear last year's total of \$50,000 by the end of the event.

Tradition, charities -- it's a win-win for everybody," said Mitch Martin, 38, also a co-founder of the Sons of Ireland.

This time, the plunge benefited 180 Turning Lives Around, Horizons Student Enrichment Program, Impact Oasis, Kevin's Journey of Hope and the Parker Family Health Center, according to the news release.

This is a really, really great way for us to get our name out in the community and to partner with the Sons of Ireland, who are so generous," said Lori Hohenleitner, executive directors of Horizons Student Enrichment Program, a small non-profit that privately raises 100 percent of its funding. "I promised them that if they picked us as one of their charities, I would actually do the plunge."

Anthony Panissidi. Asbury Park Press. Jan., 2014