

Thousands will gather for 31st Penguin Plunge

By Dotti Farrington

Hundreds of humans intent on acting like penguins will submerge themselves in the icy waters at Mackerel Cove at noon on New Year's Day.

The annual Penguin Plunge started 32 years ago and has become a heart-warming Jamestown tradition. Most would-be people-popsicles will get sufficiently wet enough to earn pledges of about \$90,000 for the Rhode Island Special Olympics. A few cold or shy ones will inevitably stay dry.

Two to three thousand others, including well wishers, donors and volunteers who are more practical minded, will crowd the half-mile beachfront to witness and applaud the iciclars. Dozens of firemen and emergency medical personnel, also donating their services, will stand by in case of hypothermia or frostbite, which to date have not happened, and to minister to the few scratches and so-called ice cream headaches that do occur.

Crowds pack the cove area in cars, vans, buses, trucks with camper tops and recreation vehicles.

Participants usually stay in their heated vehicles until moments before the fire horn sounds to start the plunge. The penguin-people rarely spend more than a minute, or until their lips turn blue, in the water.

Michael McGovern and 12 friends started Jamestown's Penguin Plunge Club in 1976. They did it for a lark, on a dare, he recalls for annual interviews. "We actually are not a club. It always



Hundreds will emulate this fellow at the Penguin Plunge next Tuesday.

has been an event. We have to update our name," he noted last week.

The town's larkers rank among the ten oldest North American groups documented as winter swimmers, well behind the Coney Island Polar Bears started in 1904 but far ahead of Special Olympic Penguins elsewhere, waddling up fund-raising records.

McGovern, who was a special education teacher during the first decade of his penguin dips, now lives in Warwick and is executive director of Special Olympics Rhode Island. The only other original local penguin is John Kelly, who is due to join McGovern and the others next week.

Records indicate the air temperature has ranged from 58 to 21 degrees, with or without wind, and sometimes chilling rain, such as last year. Regardless of the weather, scantily clad bathers enter into

frigid waters. Waddling is the preferred method of approach, but as with all guidelines for the event, nothing is mandated except good conduct. Few documented cases of misbehavior rise to arrest status, according to police.

Even getting into the water is not enforced, although McGovern encourages all to be honest and fearless about it. After all, the Special Olympics athlete's oath is: "Let me win, but if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt."

Proper attire

Penguins are encouraged to wear black and/or white plus a bow tie, and they often are described as being in tuxedos. There is no costume contest here, as in some locales, but a few plungers arrive in outlandish get-ups.

Several fire departments have become regulars, and the Hopkins Hill contingent always wears its fire helmets, and comes with a

huge inflatable penguin in tow.

Participants are encouraged to wear footwear, to avoid foot injuries they might not feel because of coldness.

During the first two decades, participants made Narragansett Café the plunge headquarters, but crowds caused the Café to contain its customers to legal limits in the past decade. The community room at the town police station serves as headquarters for registration, pledge payments and purchase of T-shirts, pins, and wrist bracelets that have become collectibles. The police station is penguin base between 9 a.m. and 2 p.m. that day.

The event is one of the biggest fundraisers for Special Olympics Rhode Island, which uses all sources of its \$1.2 million annual budget for a year-round program of sports training and athletic competition for 2,500 Rhode Island children and adults with vari-

ous challenges. Last year's take was capped by the rain at \$87,000, a year after the record-breaker of \$91,000, McGovern said.

More than 30 similar events, for polar bear or penguin persons, are conducted in the winter, not all on New Year's Day, in North America, and they raised more than \$5 million last year for Special Olympics. Copy-cat groups raise funds for various causes.

The Jamestown event has earned a place in Chase's Book of Events, a veteran reference catalog of special activities, as well as a berth in the relatively new and award-winning "Eccentric America: Weird, Wacky, and Outrageously Fun Things to See and Do in the U.S.A." Americans recognize Special Olympics as the country's favorite and most credible charity, according to national philanthropy archives.

Eunice Kennedy Shriver started Special Olympics in 1968 through her family's 1946 foundation in memory of her brother Joseph killed in World War II. The foundation was developed to prevent mental retardation such as affected their sister Rosemary and to improve the ways society relates to those with intellectual disabilities. Special Olympics started with about 1,000 athletes from 26 states. It now reaches more than 2.5 million mentally challenged persons in more than 165 countries.

Persons wanting details about the New Year's plunge, or about year round volunteer options may call McGovern at 843-7411.

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