

Polar Plunge is a cool way to support local Special Olympians

If you're looking for a cool way to help local Special Olympics Athletes, consider bracing yourself to take the plunge!

Next month, members of the public are invited to support local Special Olympics programs by joining members of the York Regional Police and the York Regional Police Association in the annual Polar Plunge. Set to take place in Newmarket on the evening of Thursday, March 5, the Polar Plunge sees costumed individuals and teams literally take the plunge into a shipping container of icy water, all in the name of raising money for local athletes with intellectual challenges.

Last year's efforts saw the Association raise over \$30,000 for Special Olympics Ontario. Province-wide, Polar Plunges have raised over \$1.5 million and benefited over 25,000 athletes over the past five years.

"It's not as cold as you think," says Karen Richards of the York Regional Police.

Ms. Richards is a long-time supporter of both the Special Olympics and the Polar Plunge, having worked with Special Olympics for the past 20 years. This year will mark her eighth Polar Plunge.

"Yes, it's freezing, but it is an amazing chance to get to interact with local athletes and raise some money for the athletes as they get to compete in the sports they love to do," she says.

Ms. Richards has previously served as a Special Olympics basketball coach, a volunteer passion that first began in 2000 when the York Regional Police hosted the Special Olympics Summer Games. As a volunteer, she says she fell in love with their mission to give opportunities to athletes with intellectual disabilities.

"I grew up working with people with intellectual disabilities as a teenager at summer camps, so it was always important for me to stay involved," says Ms. Richards, noting that this passion eventually led to her being Games Manager when the Police once again hosted the Games in 2013.

"The athletes make it all worthwhile," says Ms. Richards of her involvement in both the Special Olympics and the Polar Plunge. "The athletes are so excited on the day and the relationship the athletes have with people in law enforcement is, I think, really important as well. Through Special Olympics, athletes get the chance to travel to competitions and I have met tons of athletes from the area who have never in their life been out of Town. Because of some of the money we raise, they are able to attend the Provincial, National and World Games to participate in sports."

To do your part to help the cause, the Polar Plunge is

open for anyone to participate. Each year, there are a few handfuls of individuals who come out having had a Polar Plunge on their bucket list but never having the opportunity to do so. By coming out, they can scratch that item off their list while helping athletes and their families achieve their own goals.

?People can support the event by going online (polarplunge.ca/York) and pledging their support,? says Ms. Richards, adding this year's theme is the 1970s, so expect bell bottoms and other fashions of the era to be the order of the day. ?They can raise money for friends, there are athletes who are registered, and they can also come out on the night of and cheer us on. Come out and support us. The money that we're raising will stay so local athletes have the opportunity to compete in competition, which I think is really, really important. These are the people in their community, these are the people they go to school with, so if they want to come out and do a pretty cool experience and cross something off the bucket list, they can come out and join us that night.?

For more information on the York Regional Police Associations' 2020 Polar Plunge, visit polarplunge.ca/York. Registration is \$75, but this registration fee is waived once you've raised \$150 in sponsorship.

By Brock Weir