

Over 100 Polar Plungers raise more than \$30,000 for Special Olympics

By Brock Weir

Whether they were dressed in grass skirts, coconut bras, or more waterproof parts of their uniforms, 108 members of the community braved the cold to take the plunge Thursday night at the York Regional Police's annual Polar Plunge Event to benefit Special Olympics.

Despite the frigid winter temperatures both in the air and in the water filled shipping container pulling double duty as a plunge tank, spirits were high as members of the York Regional Police, York Regional Police Association, Special Olympians, parents and members of the community at large banded together to raise a whopping \$30,000 for Special Olympics Ontario's 25,000+ athletes. "Our annual Polar Plunge event for Special Olympics Ontario is a real testament of our uniformed and civilian members of the York Regional Police Association and what they are all about, said Todd Sepkowski, President of the York Regional Police Association, who hosted the plunge at their Bayview Avenue headquarters. "Each day, I am amazed by all their efforts to support the communities we serve. The plunge into the water may be a bit chilly, but being part of the Polar Plunge means helping to make year-round sports and competition for children and adults with intellectual abilities possible."

If people preparing to plunge were in any way put out by the cold, they said the smiles on the Special Olympians' faces, as well as the cause, warmed them up.

"Giving back to the community is really, really important," said Erinn Jay, dressed head to toe in green with her team from York Region Transit, who adopted a Moana theme for the festivities. "I used to volunteer coach [Special Olympians] in basketball, so this is a great way to give back. It's a fun event and our team has won Best Costume for the last two years, so we're going for three in a row."

These sentiments were shared by York Regional Police Constable Rachel Rudolf whose team from 2 District Platoon raised over \$1,300 for the cause.

"We all came together for a great cause," she said. "I started out with York Regional Police as a summer student and Karen Richards [YRP's Supervisor of Special Events] was my supervisor. She got me involved in the Race for Plunkett (which supports Special Olympics each year) and Special Olympics in General and I'm now part of the Special Olympics Committee participating in all the events I can.

"Coming out to events like these, meeting and talking to the athletes and seeing what these events do for them and how happy it makes them to see us participate makes it all worthwhile."

Ms. Richards told the hundreds assembled last week that the 2019 Polar Plunge was their biggest year ever. They started the day sitting at exactly \$22,000 raised and, as the hours ticked down to the plunge, they decided to up the ante to a \$30,000 fundraising goal and they more than exceeded that last minute goal.

Also on hand to thank participants for their support was Brock Robinson, Manager of the Law Enforcement Torch Run, which is the largest public awareness campaign and fundraiser for Special Olympics.

"The Law Enforcement Torch Run obviously couldn't do this without the support of the York Regional Police Association for hosting us today and the York Regional Police coming out in great numbers to support our athletes," said Mr. Robinson.

"Ultimately, this is why we all do it: the athletes. The incredible support is felt by them and I love their support today, to support the jumpers as they go for the plunge."

Added York Regional Police Deputy Chief Tom Carrique: The Special Olympic Athletes really are heroes. You are the ones we look up to every day. You provide us with inspiration to go out on the road and face the job our officers do, which takes a tremendous amount of courage; not as much courage as it's going to take to jump into the tub!?"

Local Special Olympics Athletes will receive further support throughout the year as well through a new partnership announced during the plunge, this time with York9 FC soccer, the newest member of the Canadian Premier League.

Reps from the team announced that for every single game they play, York FC will welcome Special Olympics to hold a 50/50 draw to benefit the organization.

"We are a community sport and we want to make sure everyone in the community has an opportunity to play," said York FC's Krystie Clark.

Added York9 FC Head Coach Jimmy Brennan: "It is important for our club. As the local pro club, we want to be as active as possible in the community. Supporting this event is dear to our hearts and it is all about helping and giving back."