

Posted January 8, 2008

Polar bear plunge calls for special suit

Grand Rapids man makes it a habit to raise money for charity

Once again, Jim Eichhorn of Grand Rapids was the first person to plunge into the icy waters of the Petenwell Flowage on Jan. 1 to raise money for the Children's Miracle Network.

"Jim and I jumped in together at the first Polar Bear Jump for Kids 11 years ago," said Tom Koren, owner of The Lure Bar & Grill where the event takes place. Tom, and his wife, Joan, are the organizers.



"We raised \$15,000," says Patti Shafto-Carlson, director of development for Children's Miracle Network.

Almost 100 people took part in the jump. "That was down from a year ago, probably because of the cold weather," Shafto-Carlson said. "We expect more money will come in from people who collected but felt it was too cold to jump."

"The first year we raised \$1,700. Last year we raised \$25,000," Tom Koren said. Participants are required to raise \$25 to jump; many raise much more. Although many people return, there are new ones who participate each year.

Eichhorn, who has jumped almost every year, is quite noticeable because of the polar bear outfit he wears.

"My wife, Bev, made it for me after the first jump," he said. "I encourage everyone to try it (the plunge) at least once. It's a lot of fun and a great place to be on New Year's Day." He raised \$275.

Eichhorn was responsible for bringing the jumpers who hold the record of living the farthest from the event.

"One year we had exchange students from Sao Paulo, Brazil, and they took part," he said.

Tiffany Krohn, Miss Wisconsin Rapids Area, took the plunge for the second year in a row.

"Last year, I raised \$100. This year, I have more than \$400," she said.

Children's Miracle Network is the national platform for the Miss America Pageant and Krohn has toured children's hospitals in Marshfield, Milwaukee and La Crosse.

Joe Dathe, 16, and his brother, Jon, 18, jumped for the first time. They each raised \$255. They live in Lombard, Ill., but their grandparents, Don and Patty, live in the town of Rome.

"It's something we've always wanted to do," Jon said. Joe wore a hula skirt into the water but Jon wore more traditional shorts. Their mom, Aimee Dathe, supports the cause because all proceeds stay in the area and help children.

Ronnie Brindle, 66, of Friendship was the biggest money raiser prior to the jump with \$2,452.

"He has done a great job. That is the most ever collected by one person," Tom Koren said.

"It's for the kids, I love kids," Brindle said. "I'm not afraid to ask anyone for money."

This is his sixth consecutive year to jump. "I started on a bet, and I thank everyone who has donated," Brindle said.

Steve Bright, 55, who lives in Madison and has a home in the town of Rome, jumped for the first time.

"Tom (Koren) agreed to sponsor a golf outing for the American Liver Foundation if I would agree to jump," he said. He raised \$337.

Robert Brainard, 30, and Charles Bowden, 37, were dressed in 16th century renaissance gear. It was Robert's first jump and Charles' eighth. Robert raised \$31 and Charles raised \$40.

J.R. Hildebrandt, 60, of Nekoosa made his seventh consecutive jump.

"It's a great way to start the new year," he said. He raised \$70. He also brought along some of his grandchildren. Logan Boettcher, 10, of Wisconsin Rapids raised \$29 and jumped for the second time, as did his sister, Brooke, 13, who raised \$25. Tyler Evenson, 16, of Nekoosa jumped for the first time and was still looking for donations.

Brandon Naylor, 36, of Nekoosa said, "It was awesome," after the jump. Naylor is a cancer survivor and has made the Polar Bear Jump every year.

"Events such as this are incredibly vital to the success of Children's Miracle Network," Shafto-Carlson said.

One of the biggest programs is providing \$100,000 a year to help families who have children with special needs.

"We provide equipment, medicine or transportation to help the families," Shafto-Carlson said.

The jump brings out people of all ages and sizes in all sorts of clothing from bikinis to full cover. They enter the water two at a time by jumping off the end of a pier, some feet first, others more fancy dives. Whatever brings them out, the children benefit.

Nancy Quick is a correspondent and former lifestyle editor for the Daily Tribune.