

Dakota students take the plunge for Special Olympics

Students, law enforcers among participants

- By Nicole Tuttle For MediaNews Group
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Dakota High School students participated in the Polar Plunge for Special Olympics Michigan on Feb. 22 at MacRay Harbor in Harrison Township. Pictured are Emily Tomlian in the back row, Jenna Schienke, Jenna Fabian, Marissa Kilroy, Claire Stevens, Kaitlin Gralka in the middle row and J.P. Spagnuolo in the front row.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DAKOTA HIGH SCHOOL



On Feb. 22 Dakota High School students participated in the Polar Plunge for Special Olympics Michigan at MacRay Harbor in Harrison Township. Pictured are Corbin Dailey, Mason Beski, Trenton Niese and Spencer Pekar in the back row, Ashley Crossen, Kaitlin Gralka, Jenna Schienke, Jenna Fabian,

Emily Tomlian, Claire Stevens, Seth Miller, Nicholas Palomba in the middle row and Marissa Kilroy and J.P. Spagnuolo in the front row.

Dakota High School students declared themselves freezing but fearless on Feb. 22, when they joined with the varsity lacrosse team to participate in Polar Plunge for Special Olympics Michigan.

The statewide series challenges plungers to brave icy waters in support of Special Olympics Michigan. Funds raised go toward year-round sports training and athletic competitions for children and adults with disabilities in Michigan.

Participants raise a minimum of \$75 and plunge at any one of the 30 Polar Plunge locations in the state. Special Olympics Michigan Development and Events Manager Ted Grossnickle said the Polar Plunge for Special Olympics Michigan is hosted by Law Enforcement Torch Run, a large grassroots network of law enforcement officers that host events to benefit Special Olympics.

The Macomb County event was held on Feb. 22, with check in and pre-party at noon and the plunge at 2 p.m. A post-plunge party was also held at MacRay Harbor in Harrison Township, with participants plunging into Lake St. Clair. This year the plunge raised \$76,400. A Pre-Splash bash was also held on Feb. 21 at MacRay Harbor at 8 p.m. Cost to attend was a \$5 minimum donation cover charge, which went to Special Olympics.

"Every dollar contributed to the event goes back to Macomb County kids and adults with disabilities," Grossnickle said.

This year marked the second that the polar plunge was hosted at MacRay Harbor. Law enforcement participants included teams from the Macomb Correctional Facility, Utica Police Department and Shelby Township Police Department, Grossnickle said.

Dakota High School had a total of 12 students participate in the plunge. Plunge participation was organized by the school's Special Olympics Project Unify group. Grossnickle said student groups such as Dakota's are permitted to fundraise as a team rather than pay the individual rate to participate.

Dakota's Project Unify combines sports and education programs, joining students with disabilities with general education peers as partners. In addition to Dakota, the group also works with students in several Chippewa Valley Schools elementary schools and middle schools, as well as at Macomb Intermediate School District schools.

Nadine Korneffel is a school social worker at Dakota and a co-sponsor of Project Unify, which has a total of over 200 students participating. She said that the students are involved in activities on a monthly basis and that a Special Olympics track and field day is held towards the end of each school year.

"The Project Unify club is a club for students with and without disabilities or different abilities. It is sponsored by Special Olympics of Michigan. We don't differentiate students, special education,

general education We are all Dakota students. It is an important point for inclusion, that we are Dakota students first," Korneffel said.

Mason Beski, a 16-year-old junior and general education student at Dakota, has been involved in Project Unify at Dakota for four months and decided to participate in the polar plunge.

"For an instant I couldn't move, it was like, loss of breath the second you hit the water, but it was fun," Beski said.

As part of the school's varsity lacrosse team, Beski encouraged teammates to join him for the polar plunge. Of the 12 Dakota students that plunged, six were varsity lacrosse players. Other students from Project Unify were also present to support the plungers. Korneffel said that a total of over \$900 was raised by the Dakota students.