



Submitted photos

Rick LaBreche poses for a photo with members of his 'Super Plunge' team. They will soon plunge into icy waters once every hour for a grueling 24-hour period at Salty Brine State Beach to raise crucial funds and awareness for Special Olympics Rhode Island athletes.

TAKING THE PLUNGE

Former Woonsocket firefighter raises funds, awareness for Special Olympics

By STELLA LORENCE
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WOONSOCKET – Plunging into the frigid Atlantic Ocean almost 200 times doesn't make the next plunge any easier, according to the man who's done it, retired Woonsocket firefighter Rick LaBreche.

"It's painful. That's the easiest way to put it," he said.

And yet he's preparing for his ninth annual Super Plunge, which will require that he and about a dozen other people run into the freezing waves once per hour for a full 24 hours. Their goal is not just to be cold and wet, but to raise money and awareness for Special Olympics Rhode Island.

"It's not fun. It's grueling, it's tasking, it's painful," he said. "But on the flip side, when it's done, it's rewarding."

The Super Plunge at Salty Brine State Beach will begin this year on March 23 at 1:00 p.m. and finish the



Retired Woonsocket firefighter Rick LaBreche.

following day at noon.

LaBreche is – in order, he specified – a parent of a Special Olympics athlete, the head coach of the Rhody Rangers Special Olympics team and an assistant co-director

of the Law Enforcement Torch Run Committee.

Law Enforcement Torch Run is a worldwide organization that backs

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Plunge

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Special Olympics by fund-raising, volunteering and raising awareness. It's the only grassroots organization dedicated to doing so, and this year it will celebrate its 40th anniversary.

In Rhode Island, the LETR has recruited volunteers from police departments, including the State Police, fire departments, corrections facilities and the judiciary. The namesake event consists of representatives from all branches of public safety running the "Flame of Hope" throughout the state to the start of the Summer Games Opening Ceremony.

"We all work so close together as public safety officers that we can work better as a team," LaBreche said.

LETR in Rhode Island began doing the Super Plunge in 2013 when Richmond Police Chief Elwood Johnston, then a co-director, brought the idea to the state from an international LETR conference. He invited LaBreche to participate in 2015, though by then, LaBreche had already been involved in the committee for three years and an assistant coach for one year.

"Once I was in, I was hooked," he said. "There was no turning back. I wasn't walking away from that experience of seeing what it was all about."

One year later, he would be promoted to head coach of the Rhody Rangers, a year-round team in Northern Rhode Island that includes track & field, unified basketball, unified golf and duck-pin bowling. Athletes can participate in as many of those sports as they want; LaBreche's daughter Sarah and his niece Lizzy both compete in all four.

LaBreche said he makes



Rick LaBreche and family pose for a photo.

a point at the end of the Super Plunge to shake the hand of every team member and personally thank them for what their contribution means for his daughter specifically, and for all of the athletes like her.

"We've seen tremendous growth in our daughter," he said. "She's given many speeches in the last year at different events that make me cry like a baby."

Sarah will also be one of 22 athletes to graduate from the first cohort of the Athlete Leadership University, a new two-year program through SORI that "helps athletes find their voice and become leaders in Special Olympics Rhode Island and their greater community," said SORI President and CEO Ed Pacheco.

The new program is one example of how "sports and athletics is the foundation for what we do here are Special Olympics," he said, adding that athletes take advantage of opportunities to develop leadership skills, get involved in their community and promote a practice of inclusion and respect.

"This is an organization for and by athletes," Pacheco said. "We're seeing these amazing accomplishments from the athletes and thinking, 'How much further can we take it? What's the next thing?'"

The funds from the Su-

per Plunge and other fund-raising events throughout the year ensure none of the nearly 4,000 athletes has to pay to participate on Special Olympics teams. This year's Super Plunge goal is \$130,000, and since its inception in the state in 1984, the LETR has contributed nearly \$2 million to SORI plus volunteer coaches and event staff.

And although the funds are important, Pacheco and LaBreche both said raising awareness is still a crucial part of the LETR and the Super Plunge mission.

"We are still working to stomp out bias," Pacheco said. "That can never not be a priority for us."

Pacheco said that in addition to potentially inspiring people to get involved with SORI, either as a volunteer or as an athlete, events like the Super Plunge "promote that conversation" about "eliminating excluding people" because of a disability or a perceived difference.

The Super Plunge at Salty Brine State Beach will begin this year on March 23 at 1:00 p.m. and finish the following day at noon. LaBreche said this year's plunge will be extra special for him because Sarah has signed up to be an "arctic athlete" for the first time and will participate in the last plunge of the event.

The Super Plunge team members are still about \$55,000 short of their goal. Interested donors can contribute to a specific team member through the donation link on the team's

Facebook page, or SORI also takes donations online and through the mail to 370 George Washington Highway in Smithfield, Rhode Island.

Spectators are encouraged on the day of the event, Pacheco said.

"I can't promise balmy 72-degree weather, but I can promise smiles," he said.

Follow Stella Lorence on Twitter @slorenc3.

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