



Special Olympics
Wisconsin

"Let me win. But if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt." Special Olympics Athlete Oath

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If your friends jumped into a lake in the middle of winter...

Would you? The kiss of winter reddens thousands of adventurers' cheeks as they stand along the lakefront, sporting a myriad of colorful costumes that reflect like a rainbow off the near-arctic waters. The beach is speckled with warming tents and crowds huddling together to keep warm.

To an oblivious passer-by, it might be easy to confuse this scene with that of a glacial circus carnival. From college students dressed in bikinis to law enforcement officers jumping in uniform, the Special Olympics Polar Plunge® draws an array of individuals trying to rid themselves of cabin fever, get their endorphins flowing, and support Special Olympics athletes in Wisconsin.

This chaos began at Lake Onalaska a year before the millennium and has snowballed into 12 Polar Plunge® events that will be held at lakes, ponds, and outdoor swimming pools across the state this year. For Plungers, it's more than just a dare-devilish act for friends, family, or colleagues: it's a way for people to raise money to improve the quality of life for those with cognitive disabilities.

WEL Companies, a Partner for the World's Largest Truck Convoy® for the past five years, is one of many businesses that has embraced this cool way to back the organization. Chris Tielens, Director of Recruiting, had an aunt who competed in Special Olympics and is a huge proponent of the mission. Last year Tielens decided to take his support from land to water and he began recruiting his employees to join him in "Freezin' for a Reason."

"WEL became involved in the plunge when Chris asked if anyone would jump with him... I don't think he had a choice in this," said Hali Nichol, who works with Tielens in the recruiting department at WEL. But, as she recalls, Chris' excitement didn't catch on as quickly as her boss had hoped. "Out of the entire department I was the only one that said I would," she said proudly. "Later, we recruited two more jumpers from WEL."

When the foursome returned to the office on Monday to share stories of their escapade, to their co-workers it sounded as if they had survived a shipwreck in Antarctica. "As they say in the movies, the rest is history," said Nichol, regarding their late success getting a team together when Plunge season rolls around. This year, 16 more jumpers will join the four veterans for a quick dip in The Watering Hole and a lifetime's worth of memories.

According to Nichol, things got a little silly when the pledging wars began to see who could raise the most money. "Last year, when we were competing with each other for pledges, one of our plungers told people for a certain dollar amount he would wear a tutu," she said. "A light bulb went off and we soon became the Ballerina Truckers." The fun didn't stop there. "Chris brought it to my attention that he would not be able to wear the tutu with the rest of the team. That is when we decided he would have to wear a chicken costume!"

Perhaps the chicken costumes and tutus are one of the reasons why the team decided to host fundraisers like "Brat Fry's" and "Wear Jeans to Work Day" to raise funds this year. "All proceeds go to our team kitty for pledges," Hali explained. "We will split the money between each WEL plunger after all events are finished."

A whopping total of 657 Plungers have raised more than \$122,000 at the three Polar Plunge events that have taken place so far in Muskego, Menomonie, and Wisconsin Rapids. With nine more Polar Plunges left, there is still plenty of time for all newbies to join the fun and jump in!

If jumping into a frozen lake or river isn't up your alley, you can still sign up as "Too Chicken to Plunge" and raise pledges, join a team but watch your teammates jump as you stay chicken on the sidelines.

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