

Maumelle plunge moves to community pool

BY SAM PIERCE
Staff Writer

MAUMELLE — For the first time, the Central Arkansas Polar Plunge in Maumelle, to benefit Special Olympics Arkansas, will take place at the Jess Odom Community Center.

"This year, we are excited because the community center is a new location for us," said Camie Powell, director of marketing and partnership for Special Olympics Arkansas. "Working with the Parks and Recreation Department has been amazing."

In years past, the plunge has taken place at Willastein Lake. Powell said that with lake water, there are always issues with safety and other concerns.

"Last year, we switched to a drop tank from the fire department, but community pools are just a more viable answer for what we are looking for," Powell said. "We are super thankful that the Parks and Recreation Department has opened up that venue for us."

She said it is hard to tell if having the event at the pool will allow room for more plungers, but she said it will allow more space for spectators and judges, and there will be a changing room. She said the facilities are a lot nicer.

"We are hoping more people will come out and enjoy such a great facility and put their teams together for this year's plunge," Powell said.

The Central Arkansas 2020 Polar Plunge, hosted by Law Enforcement Torch Run and Special Olympics Arkansas Area 5, is scheduled for 10:30 a.m. Feb. 29 at the community center, 1100 Edgewood Drive in Maumelle. Plungers can register at www.firstgiving.com/soar and create a personal fundraising Web page to collect donations from family, friends and co-workers. Each participant will receive a long-sleeve T-shirt. There is a \$50 minimum donation to take the plunge. Proceeds from the event will go to Special Olympics Arkansas.

"We have been doing the plunge in Maumelle for several years, and generally, we have a really good turnout by the community, as well as the surrounding area," Powell said. "That's why we named it Central Arkansas because it pulls from other cities as well."

Powell estimated that last year's plunge raised \$11,000.

"We are always looking to grow" she said. "The bulk of our growth in a plunge is dependent on community members and business leaders."

"Whether they are utilizing our on-line giving platform with crowd funding, either way, there is an incentive to raise more money. Every year, we are hoping to grow and have more plungers than ever."

"That would be fantastic." The city of Greenbrier will host a polar plunge Saturday, beginning at 11 a.m. at Woolly Hollow State Park.

The money raised by the plunges fund athletes' companions and medals for the winners. Powell said Special Olympics Arkansas has 240 competitions a year, with 20 sports.

"Our competitions are 100 percent free to our athletes," she said. "We also offer health education and leadership training for our athletes."

Powell said many athletes from the area participate in the plunges, which she said is great for the community.

"They see our athletes supporting their own organization, and that is the most powerful thing," Powell said. "They are raising their own funds because they are so passionate about Special Olympics." She said she doesn't know of anyone involved with Special Olympics Arkansas who hasn't at one point taken the plunge because that is how important it is to the organization.

"Come out and experience the atmosphere," she said. "Most people think more layers is better, but I would say, the fewer the layers, the better. Maybe a swimsuit or something similar."

"But we encourage costumes, but nothing too bulky — just have fun with it. Take a plunge in the water, and create awareness."

She said \$50 may not seem like a lot of money to some, but because of the partners Special Olympics has throughout the state, "we are able to maximize that dollar."

"It opens up a large amount of opportunities for our athletes," Powell said.

For more information, visit specialolympicsarkansas.org. Staff writer Sam Pierce can be reached at (501) 244-4314 or spierce@arkansasonline.com.

SNAPSHOTS: 9TH ANNUAL POLAR PLUNGE, LAKE DARDANELLE STATE PARK



Members of Team Arkansas Nuclear One, with Entergy, link arms and brave the cold waters of Lake Dardanelle on Feb. 1 during the ninth annual Polar Plunge. See more photos at www.arkansasonline.com/galleries/categories/rivervalley/.



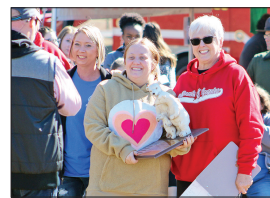
Heidi, left, 9, and her dad, James Winnen, both of Morrilton, exit the cold water after taking the plunge with their team during the ninth annual Polar Plunge.



Some of the Arkansas Area 17 Special Olympics athletes are, from left, Matthew Franks, Lura Cook, Adam Daubenheier, Canyon Collins and Michael Franks. An athlete not pictured is Robin Burns.



Dessie Bull, left, accepts the award for Polar Plunge Best Costume for Team Smurf with Imperial Vending, presented by Rhyann Curtis of Maumelle.



Brandi Gagen, community support waiver specialist for Friendship Community Care, dressed as Tenderheart Care Bear, accepts her team's plaque for the team that raised the most money for the Polar Plunge on Feb. 1 for Special Olympics Arkansas Area 17. The team raised \$4,287. Brandi also won for the individual who raised the most money, \$1,630. Pictured in red is Darla Jones, Special Olympics Arkansas Area 17 director. Together, participants raised \$12,850 at the event.

WARRIOR

Continued from Page 1V

Everette portrays quiet strength, personified by Phyl's Warriors, a nonprofit organization she formed to help other patients and their families, and the kind of strength that attracts and inspires others, like her mentor, Shelli Crowell.

"You know how when you look at someone and see their body language and the way they speak back to you and look you in the eyes, you can just tell who they are?" Crowell said. "That was [Everette]. You just knew her heart and who she was, even though she was really quiet. She obviously had a lot going on, but I could always tell the goodness inside of her."

Crowell said she first observed these traits in Everette when she was a shy teenager, but her mental toughness had been honed for most of her life. "I was raised by my whole family," Everette said. "My aunt raised me up until I was about 5, and I came here to Morrilton to live with my biological mother. She just wasn't, you know, ready. So my whole life was in and out, in and out of things. I grew up fighting."

Everette credits her grandparents, Velma and the late AJ Everette, for giving her a foundation and structure. What she didn't get was a whole lot of slack — in schoolwork, household chores or brain cancer.

"[Doctors] said, 'You have a brain tumor,' and I just broke down crying, and my grandmother looked at me, and she said, 'What are you crying for?' and kept a straight face. Not a tear," Everette said.

The moment galvanized into a mentality: Don't just sit there — fight. And fight she did. Despite undergoing two years of rigorous treatment that kept her hospitalized for



As a cancer survivor, Phyllis Everette wanted a way to help others fight back. She started the nonprofit Phyl's Warriors and works to schedule small local events and create things to sell, with the money raised going to cancer-research organizations.

"I was here, and I made a difference."

Phyllis Everette
CANCER SURVIVOR AND FOUNDER OF PHYL'S WARRIORS

a month and temporarily paralyzed her from the waist down, Everette graduated from high school in 2010.

She also found a friend and confidante in Crowell, not because Everette was particularly public about her condition, but because such news travels fast in a town the size of Morrilton. The 53-year-old said she felt a connection with the young cancer patient from the start.

"My dad had lung cancer, and because of that, I did Relay for Life," Crowell said. "I remember it was really one of the first times we spoke. I just thought, 'I'm gonna make this baby talk to me.' We didn't have big conversations before; it was just in passing. But in

there.' But when you tell me I'm not going to be able to do something, I'm gonna do it.

"When I got there, people were like, 'Uh, she's got a lot of issues.' When I met with an adviser, she said, 'How are you going to do this?' and she was really disrespectful about it. I just looked at her and smiled, and I said, 'I'll do it.'"

Everette made good on that vow, then took on launching her nonprofit, a process she knew nothing about, she said, with similarly dogged zeal. As luck would have it, another Morrilton woman had already gone through the process, so Everette volunteered her time, in part, to learn about setting up her own group and partly to support the cause of brain-cancer research.

"[Everette] was quiet at first. She didn't really know us," said Julie Sessions, the brain-cancer survivor behind the nonprofit Going Gray for Julie. "I invited her to come to my cancer support group, Caring Hearts in Conway, and she came to that with me, and she came

out of her shell pretty quick. She's been [attending] now for maybe two years. We've become very close. We're really good friends."

Everette started working on Phyl's Warriors in 2016; the group solidified in 2017 and received its 501(c)(3) status a year later. Everette devoted her time to scheduling small local events and creating things to sell, with the money raised going to cancer-research organizations. Her group's logo, fashioned after Wonder Woman's crest, speaks of the same strength that has sustained its founder.

"This is my job," she said. "When I hit the pillow, all I'm thinking about is Phyl's Warriors: We gotta get this done; we gotta get that scheduled; we gotta get this. I tell everybody I found my passion: to help somebody else."

"I would be the most selfish person of anybody if I didn't, you know. How can I just survive cancer? I've gotta fight for others. That's the whole idea where the 'warrior' came from. You can't just survive; you've gotta fight. I've gotta go to war for other people."

Everette didn't know how close to home her campaign would come. About 18 months ago, Crowell, Everette's mentor and the group's biggest supporter, was diagnosed with breast cancer, reversing entirely the roles of mentor and mentee. In fact, the two friends laugh about how, when Crowell tearfully revealed her diagnosis, Everette channeled her grandmother.

"She was hard on me, but that's what kicked me into place," Crowell said. "She and Julie [Session] both said, 'Stop your bellyachin'; it's gonna be fine.' I've always taken negatives and tuned them to positives. I just get knocked back for a wider span than they do."

It just takes me some time, but they got me through it."

"There's always somebody out there who has it worse than you do. You have to wake up every day and understand that and make the most of things. I feel more alive since I've been diagnosed than I've ever felt in my entire life."

Though still in his infancy, Phyl's Warriors raised enough money to serve 75 families at Little Rock's Ronald McDonald House last year, as well as awarded its first scholarship to a student who has overcome a life challenge to reach college.

Everette lit up talking about these accomplishments and has big plans for the organization's future — plans even her own future health can't curtail, she said. Last fall, Everette was again diagnosed with cancer, kicking off another long road of treatments and surgery. On that subject, she just smiled and shrugged.

"You know, the day they called me, we were like, 'We're sorry we've got to tell you, but it's breast cancer.' I said, 'OK, that's fine,' she said. 'I told my auntie, and she said, 'Are you crazy? What's wrong with you?' I said, 'Oh it's not a big deal. We've already done this before; it's just another hurdle.'"

Everette then pulled out a beaded bracelet, the kind she makes and sells for the organization.

"The rough beads represent the road will be rough sometimes. These colored beads remind you that there's always beauty, no matter what," she said, then pointed to a small gold elephant. "The elephant is my thing. That means just keep pushing."

"It's not like I'll always be here, but one thing I can say is, I was here, and I made a difference."