

Diving right in to the new year

Icy fundraising event 20 years old 'A good way to get over a hangover'

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At first we looked like a convention of spacemen descending on the shores of Lake Ontario at Humber Bay Park West.

Wearing more than 34 kilograms of gear, including high-tech rubber suits, air tanks and face masks, we were actually a group of local scuba divers — with me along for the ride — who couldn't think of anything better to do on New Year's Day than spend 30 minutes swimming around the bottom of Lake Ontario.

"If there's something stupid you can do, I'm right there," said Ritchard Findlay, who started diving just six months ago and couldn't wait for his first dive of 2006.

"It's just fun," offered another diver, as to why 50 people were happily trudging toward the grey waters of Lake Ontario.

"Fun" wasn't the word foremost in my mind when the 2C water hit my face, making it feel like my head had been cracked open and my brain replaced with a block of ice.

And that was just the first minute — 29 more to go.

The point of this is again? There's not much to see in this part of the lake, so over the years divers have left behind Barbie dolls on lines, a headless mannequin named "Ursula" and street signs directing divers to "keep right" or warnings for "local traffic only."

"We have no idea what miscreant citizens would steal road signs and put them underwater," Findlay said, grinning.

My dive gear, used less than a year ago in the lovely blue, 29C waters of Thailand, went into deep shock.

The regulator that delivers oxygen from the air tank on my back froze up and ended my dive after less than 15 minutes.

As I was chilled to the bone and couldn't feel my face, hands or feet, I wasn't too sad.

So why do this? Others more experienced than I with this type of diving (some actually claimed to feel hot) had a variety of explanations for what draws them to water on New Year's Day.

"I'm bored. I don't drink, so I have nothing else to do," said one diver. From the opposite

'I don't drink so I have nothing else to do,' explained one diver

end of the spectrum, another offered: "It's a good way to get over a hangover."

"It's better than sleeping in," Oshawa's Paul Heldsinger said while getting his dive gear on in the Humber Bay Park West parking lot, south of Lake Shore Blvd at Parkdawn Ave.

Some divers, like Mike Veit, weren't cold at all.

"I'm insulated by Guinness," said Veit, patting his waistline. "You get what you pay for in insulation and I've paid a fortune for mine."

For Paul Groves, yesterday was positively mild.

He's been doing New Year's Day dives for many years and re-

calls a dive a few years ago when the air temperature was minus 25C and the divers were fighting over whether it was more accurate to say the water temperature was 0C or one quarter of a degree C.

"My dad told me — he died at 91 — 'I didn't do enough, so please do in your life everything you want to do,'" Groves said.

For Groves, diving on New Year's Day is one of those things. GTA divers, organized by Scuba 2000 of Richmond Hill, have been diving at various local spots on New Year's Day for 20 years, "just for the fun of it," Christine Lovett-Schaus said.

Last year, after the Boxing Day tsunami hit Southeast Asia, they decided to raise money to help victims.

The divers donated \$900. Scuba 2000 matched it and the Canadian government, under a tsunami program, matched it again.

This year, the cause is childhood cancer.

The divers contributed more than \$1,000 to the Childhood Cancer Foundation, which funds research and provides programs for families of children with cancer, Findlay said.

The cause was a great one and so was the diving, he said.

"To do something as patently stupid as diving in freezing cold water, it was really wonderful," he said.

In that case, what about a New Year's Day polar bear dip, where people jump into Lake Ontario for a few seconds with nothing but a bathing suit on?

"Not on your life," said Bruce Jewer, a diving instructor with Scuba 2000.

"That's freaking mental." ✕



DAVID COOPER/TORONTO STAR

Star reporter Kerry Gillespie, a certified diver, joins about 50 people yesterday in a 30-minute New Year's Day dive in Toronto Harbour at Humber Bay Park West to raise money for childhood cancer.