

REGION: Locals run in annual Rutgers Big Chill

By Azra Baig, Special Writer

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Azra Baig photo. An estimated 9,000 people, including several locals, ran in Rutgers University's annual Big Chill event in New Brunswick Saturday.

NEW BRUNSWICK — Rutgers University held its 12th Annual Big Chill Event — a charity 5K race — to help needy kids, on Saturday.

Unlike most races, the Big Chill race does not have a registration fee for participants to be able to take part in the event.

Instead, the participants are asked to donate a new toy worth at least \$10 to be given to a needy child.

According to Executive Director of Recreation at Rutgers University, Ms. Diane Bonanno, "The donations are given to approximately 17 different charities."

She said, these charities include the less fortunate children in New Brunswick, Franklin Township and organizations such as the Ronald McDonald House, the American Red Cross and many other organizations that help children in need.

Ms. Bonanno said, about 8,900 people from around the area registered to race in the Big Chill Event including more than 400 teams.

For the very first time, members of the Islamic Society of Central Jersey of South Brunswick formed a team to take part in the event.

"We were aware that many individuals from ISCJ participated in previous years of the Big Chill event, however this time around many from our congregation felt it was important to register an official team from the Islamic Society of

Central Jersey to bring out even more people to be part of the broader community for a fun worthy charitable event," A spokesperson from the ISCJ said. "It was a family friendly event, to see parents with their own children partaking in the walk was something to make it even that much more special."

The ISCJ team consisted of men, women and children of all ages with both runners and walkers. ISCJ members who had participated in the Big Chill Event in previous years were happy to see others come out in support. For some ISCJ members, it was their first time ever participating in an organized race and for others it was a short three miles compared to the marathons they had done before.

An ISCJ Member, Ross Masood, age 32 of East Brunswick, explained why he felt it was important to support this race.

"It was indeed our moral, civic and religious duty to be involved in all facets of our community, especially around the holiday season when we can help show so many underprivileged children that their community has not forgotten them and they too deserve the joys and toys the more privileged children get," he said.

Mr. Masood said that in recent months he had suffered from a health condition affecting his physical capabilities but he wanted to be part of the team and support the cause.

"As someone recovering from a condition where walking was in impossibility just months ago, it was important for me to show my appreciation to the community that helped and supported me and my family in our time of need that registering, showing up, participating, and even completing the walk was a good way to give back, even though I was the last to finish, everyone won this race," he said.

Ms. Bonanno said that the forecast of rain for the race was "worrisome" but it turned out to be warm so many people showed up.

Even though the exact number could not be verified, she said thousands were there since it took more than five and a half minutes to get all the runners and walkers to reach the starting line to start the race.

The race started and finished in front of the College Avenue Gym with runners and walkers racing through the streets of New Brunswick.

Regarding the toys collected, she said, "Normally we get 1,000 more gifts than the number of people registered so probably we collected anywhere from 10,000-11,000 presents."

Once the Big Chill participants completed the race they were treated to water, muscle milk, food including bagels, chips, granola bars and cookies and they were also given commemorative Big Chill water bottles.

The College Avenue Gym was packed with participants sharing their race experience and taking pictures with friends, family and with the Big Chill Polar Bear Mascot.

Awards were given to the top finishers in different age categories and to the largest team participating.

Adnan Kwara, age 45, and Amal Awad, age 43, husband and wife from Monroe Township and ISCJ members were very excited to take part in the Big Chill Event for the very first time.

Mr. Kwara said, "The experience was great!"

He said he didn't think too many people would show up due to the forecast of rain but was impressed with the number of people that showed up.

Upon seeing the thousands of toys, he said, "I hope that these toys reach quickly to the less fortunate children and give them hope and encouragement."

Ms. Awad also described her race experience. "It's important to extend a hand and support kids who are less fortunate. The best part was finishing the race and meeting up at the gymnasium to eat, take pictures and glance at all the toys that were donated. It's a great feeling to witness other people care to participate and be part of a cause."

Both Mr. Kwara and Ms. Awad look forward to participating in next year's Big Chill Event and plan to also encourage others to come out and join the event.

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