Taking the chilly plunge

Hundreds come out for annual fundraiser

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SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

WILLIMANTIC — One person jumping into the icy waters of the Natchaug River on the first day of February is a head-scratcher.

But when hundreds do so, it must mean it’s time for the annual Plunge for Hunger fundraiser at Lauter Park in Willimantic, an annual — if not quirky — tradition to help the local Covenant Soup Kitchen.

The annual plunge Saturday saw people dress in outlandish clothes and dive into a cold river to help with feeding needy folks and families.

The event is sponsored by the Eastern Connecticut State University rugby team.

Ray Aramini, the rugby coach and longtime soup kitchen volunteer, helped create this fundraiser.

He said events like this are unique to the community.

Plus, he said, the plunge offers an easy outlet for people to help — albeit if it requires a quick, cold dip in the river.

“Everyone can do this,” Aramini said. “It is not a hunger marathon or anything like that, but it’s something anyone can do.”

Aramini said events like these help to create change and make good communities stronger.

“This program was created to help raise money,” Aramini. “It helps to bring awareness to neighbors that are hungry and it is important to help alleviate hunger in the community.”

Andrew Votta, who participated

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in the plunge, said events like this make the community whole.

“IT brings different groups of people together,” Votta said. “Events like these are very important since some people aren’t as fortunate to succeed.”

Eileen Ossen, who is affiliated with the fundraiser, said this plunge is always fun to be a part of.

“It’s exceptional,” Ossen said. “The plunge gets hundreds coming out in this frigid winter.”

Ossen, who helps oversee the Jeffrey P. Ossen Family Foundation, said the foundation supports this cause and has offered lots of help for the Town of Windham.

“My foundation has offered a matching grant to help out the community.” Ossen said.

She said last year’s plunge helped raise $140,000 with the foundation match and it was a success.

The foundation match, according to Aramini, is key to the event.

He said Ossen wanted to help raise more money with the help from her foundation.

“Eileen saw how good this event was and wanted to contribute,” Aramini said. “She created a match fund for every dollar raised at the kitchen.”

Ossen said fundraisers like these are important for the community.

“Events like this one are essential for communities to thrive,” Ossen said. “Every community has some struggling efforts serving those in need and Windham is committed to helping people.”

Ossen said her foundation’s purpose is to create change in Windham.

“The purpose of the foundation is to influence and change the economy here in town,” Ossen said. “We hope to improve education as well as improve health care needs.”

She said the soup kitchen is always trying to help with the community any way it sees fit.

“The kitchen is dedicated to those in need,” Ossen said. “Helping communities like Windham can attract people to this very important cause.”

For more information on the Covenant Soup Kitchen, including how to donate, visit www.covenantsoupkitchen.org.