

They ran 200 miles because ...
Reach the Beach Relay draws 365 teams with their own unique causes



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HAMPTON — While running shoes were a clear commonality among participants in the Reach the Beach Relay on Saturday, the reasons for participating were unique to each team.

The 10th annual relay race, which began 200 miles away at Cannon Mountain in Franconia on Friday morning and ended on the sands of Hampton Beach State Park on Saturday, drew 365 teams and more than 4,500 runners, each representing an array of causes.

Participation ranged from recreational purposes to representing a loved one, and from fund-raising efforts to team-building.

Nicole Schmidt, an Exeter native, and Erik Skulte, both currently living in Connecticut, ran in the relay for their 1-year-old son, Alexander Skulte, who was born 26 weeks premature and with a brain hemorrhage.

Their team, comprised of "friends and friends of friends," competed to raise money for The Baby Alex Foundation, a charitable organization that helps fund research for the neurological health of children.

"That's how we got here," said Erik amid teammates near the finish line Saturday. "Let's bring something good out of something terrible."

Despite numerous teams competing for fund-raising efforts, the "Ultra Crazys," a team comprised of local running enthusiasts decided to participate for the third consecutive year for recreational purposes.

"It's just friends getting together," said Paul Willis, a Newfields resident, shortly after he finished racing Saturday afternoon.

Rich Matthes, a Portsmouth resident and "Ultra Crazys" team captain, said he is glad such a large-scale relay race is held in New Hampshire because it displays positive qualities of the state.

"It's perfect because it's such a great place to live," said Matthes. "We've met people from South Dakota, Ontario, and it's great to show people what a great place the Seacoast is."

The Reach the Beach Relay is constructed as a course that takes runners through 31 New Hampshire communities, starting in mountainous terrain and ending in coastal waters. Many of the roads are less traveled by motorized traffic to allow competitors to take in the scenery.

Rich Mazzola, co-chair race director and co-founder of the Reach the Beach Relay, said the race is geared to the average runner or recreational athlete and that the event has become a fund-raising vehicle for many of its participants.

Mazzola also said 30 teams competed in the first relay race in 1999, but that the event has grown tremendously over the years with more and more volunteers and community involvement.

"One of the most rewarding feedbacks we get from participants is their great interactions with volunteers," said Mazzola.

One of those volunteers is Michael Anthony Hill Junior, a member of City Year who lives in Hampton.

Hill welcomed competitors on Saturday to the final sandy stretch of track that leads to the finish line. This was his second year volunteering at the race.

"It's awesome to be out here," he said as he waved tired and sweaty competitors to the homestretch. "And being at the finish line it's great to see the heart of the runners."

The New Balance Boston team, based in Hudson, Mass., came in first place.