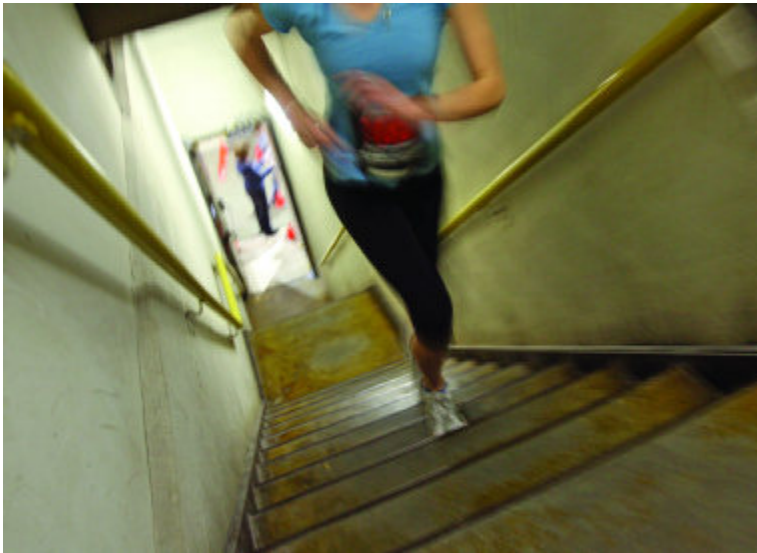


300 race to top of Providence skyscraper

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Runners climbed about 60 flights and 600 steps on their way to the 29th floor of One Financial Plaza, in Providence, in a benefit for the American Lung Association yesterday. The Climb of Your Life event was one of eight held in New England.

The Providence Journal / John Freidah

PROVIDENCE — Nearly 300 people taking part in a fundraiser scrambled up the stairs from the ground floor to the 29th floor of One Financial Plaza yesterday morning. The most common comment as they staggered across the last stair: “Whew!”

For some, it was a sigh. As in the pain is finally over.

Others spat it out and looked around furtively, as if they wanted more stairs to climb.

One woman said, “Whew! Get me a stretcher.”

But she was just kidding.

Everyone was breathing very hard.

This made sense, because they were all climbing to raise funds for the American Lung Association of New England, the nonprofit organization that promotes healthy lungs and advocates against air pollution.

The group is also sponsoring stair climbs in Boston, Worcester, Springfield, Manchester, N.H., and Hartford this winter.

Yesterday's event was the second for Providence. Last year, a Climb of Your Life fundraiser was held at the Westin Providence hotel.

The Lung Association, which had hoped to raise \$45,000, by midday had \$51,900, with more coming in. Each competitor paid a \$35 registration fee and was expected to raise at least \$65 more in pledges.

"We've seen tremendous growth with this event," said Elise Daley. "It is unique. And it is something someone can do if they have been affected by lung disease."

Daley, of the association, said she hopes the race will be run again next year at One Financial Plaza.

Teams of firefighters, police officers and athletes took part. One team of runners raised nearly \$3,500. A Providence law firm, LGC&D, raised nearly \$2,700. Ten members of the Narragansett Fire Department raised nearly \$2,500.

Laurie Drucker, property manager for CB Richard Ellis, which operates the building for Meritage Properties, asked the owners if they would allow the building to be used for the event, and then spent the day there making sure everything went well.

Providence College cheerleaders and lung association volunteers provided plenty of encouragement.

Some of the climbers were asthmatics. Some climbed in honor of relatives with lung disease.

Timothy Hudyncia, a Warwick chiropractor and avid stair climber, ran up the 86 floors of the Empire State Building last month.

Yesterday morning, Hudyncia sprinted up the 28 floors (there is no 13th floor) in Providence, went back to the bottom, and then made the climb again with his 80-year-old father, Michael.

"It wasn't bad," he said. "We took a lot of breaks. It's really a gentle form of exercise."

Some of the most stressed climbers were members from the nine teams of firefighters.

The teams were competing against each other. And each firefighter wore full gear — helmet, coat, pants and boots as well as Scott Air-Paks, more than 50 pounds of equipment.

Nearly every firefighter doubled over at the top, unscrewed his regulator and pulled the gear off his face, letting the compressed air rush out as the men exchanged fist bumps and back slaps.

Kimberly Rocha, captain of the Total Fitness Team from Swansea, was the fastest female runner with a time of 4 minutes, 58 seconds.

The fastest male runner was Chris Solarz of New York. He did the stairs in 2 minutes, 49 seconds.

Solarz wins a lot. He is a marathoner. And last year, he won the Boston event, climbing 41 stories in 4 minutes, 32 seconds. This year, he won it again.

In January, Solarz, 28, a financial analyst, and a friend, set a record for visiting every one of 468 subway stations in New York in less than 24 hours, according to New York news accounts.

The fastest police officer was Providence Detective Sgt. Philip Hartnett. The fastest health care worker was Hudyncia. His father won an award for being the oldest climber.

The fastest team of firefighters was from Fall River.