

WEST KENDALL**West Kendall gym hosts Crunch Challenge to benefit center****Nearly three dozen women worked their abs at a West Kendall gym for a good cause Saturday -- a national crunch challenge that raised money for a pediatric cancer research center.**

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Special to The Miami Herald

More than 30 women showed up at the Lady of America Fitness Center in the Hammocks for an hour-long workout for their abs. But the event wasn't about burning calories, it was about raising money for the St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

The fitness center was part of the nationwide Lady of America/Ladies Workout Express Ab Crunch Challenge with the goal to raise \$1 million for the pediatric cancer research center. A secondary goal: to set a new Guinness World Record for the most abdominal crunches done in one hour by a group.

"The response we've had has been beautiful," said

Hammocks center owner Salam Hachem, who helped motivate participants by clapping dancing and cheering them along.

To the beat of trance music in the background, participants worked their way to a total of 2,100 crunches under the direction of exercise physiologist Rodney Knight, who used a marker to keep track of the number of sets completed on the gym's mirror.

The mood was slightly somber at first when participants learned that the poster child for the project, 5-year-old Madelyn Beamon, had lost her battle against neuroblastoma in February.

But sadness turned to motivation for members like Ileana Suarez, a member of Lady of America who is now in remission after a battle with breast cancer.

Halfway through the hour, when the pain of the workout was starting to set in for most, Suarez showed no sign of discomfort. She simply smiled and said, "We have life. We're doing this for life."

A few fraternity and sorority members from Florida International University also took part in event.

"We came out today for the kids," said senior Anthony Varona, a member of PI Kappa Phi.

Although he and the other FIU students hadn't been taking part in the 10 weeks of preparation training leading up to Saturday, they said it was the cause that kept them motivated.

At the end of the session, prizes, including tae kwan do lessons and gift certificates, were raffled, and participants were treated to fat free ham and cheese and banana bread.

Through donations over the past two months, the Hammocks center raised a total of \$1,181, organizers said. The national tally for money and crunches for the possible new Guinness record are still undetermined, organizers said.

For more information about the project, visit www.abcrunchchallenge.com.



CHRIS CUTRO / FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

Monica Meneses (front) and Patti Meneses (one back) do an advanced version of a crunch during the Ab Crunch Challenge to benefit the St. Jude Children's Research Hospital at Lady of America Fitness Center in West Kendall.