



# Removing Barriers to Swimming Proficiency in the Rhode Island African American Community

A Model For the Nation

**Swim Empowerment:**  
An Adopt a Doctor Project

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## Foreword:



As spring deepened into summer heat throughout the early 1960s, thousands of civil-rights activists ventured from the lunch counters and interstate buses to their community pools and public beaches. Though this chapter in the history of integration is under-recorded when compared to the sit-ins, boycotts and marches, it was no less violent and no less inspiring. “Wade-in” protestors at Biloxi beaches faced attacks with chains and tire irons; in Chicago, stones and boulders picked from the beach itself. The Monsoon Motor Lodge in St. Augustine, Florida gained national attention when newspapers published photographs of the manager pouring muriatic acid into a pool of Black demonstrators.

Even with the victories which followed these brutal episodes, the state of swimming in Rhode Island, and the US more generally, remains sharply divided along class and especially racial lines – with many viewing it as an exercise for the elite, a pastime belonging more to the country club than the urban neighborhood. And yet, swimming should be an activity of equal opportunity, requiring little expense to the individual participant and suitable to those of any body type, age, or racial background.

It should be – but it is not. Why? As this urgently needed report demonstrates, the factors which may preclude an individual from swimming are many, complex, and frequently specific to minority and low-income communities: ranging from the culturally entrenched attitudes which have been mentioned to the dearth of publically available facilities to the fears of drowning which can persist

throughout generations in non-swimming families.

The potential benefit to public health, however, is tremendous. Physiologists agree that swimming engages all of the major muscle groups and can improve cardiovascular fitness, strength, and weight loss efforts. Because the body bears significantly less weight in water, swimming is also an ideal activity for those who may find pain or difficulty in land exercise. There is a life-saving imperative, as well, when one considers the fact that drowning is the second leading cause of unintentional injury deaths for children 1-14 years in age, and occurs at an alarmingly higher rate among African American youth.

It is with pleasure and pride, then, that I add my voice to this report's call for action, to the undertaking of Swim Empowerment. While swimming is central to the work of this initiative, it is the second word – empowerment – which forms its ambition. There are few better metaphors for self-improvement than swimming, the movement from one point to another through a field of resistance. The barriers to equal participation in this sport have indeed been considerable, though not insurmountable. By engaging thousands of Rhode Islanders in swimming over the next decade, we are sure to empower a more inclusive group in leading healthy, safe, and confident lives.

*Dr. Michael Fine  
Director  
Rhode Island Department of Health  
September 2013*

## **Preface:**



### **I Promised A Mother...**

Twenty-two years ago I was a State Representative from College Hill in Providence, Rhode Island when I got a call nobody would want to receive. On the other end of the line was a distraught mother whose son had died two days earlier at Olney Pond in Rhode Island's Lincoln Woods State Park. He did not know how to swim. The tears were palpable through the phone and her pain weighed heavy on my heart. Parents should not have to outlive their children, especially not from such a tragic and preventable accident. I asked this mother how I could help, knowing that nothing I could do would repair the permanent wound her son's drowning had left her with. But she then told me there was something I could do. She and her son were Muslims, and it was against her Islamic beliefs to permit an autopsy. In contradiction to her beliefs, state law holds that any death on state property requires an autopsy, no matter what. This poor woman who had already lost a son was now caught in a bureaucratic battle for the right to her religious convictions. So she asked me to intervene for her and reach out to the state coroner to convince him to release the body for a funeral. It was the least I could do to help this mother in need, so I called the coroner at home and asked that the body be delivered for the family. The coroner, however, was immune to such calls for sympathy. He could not be swayed and indignantly insisted on following legal procedure. Who was I, he implied, to call him and try to

influence him to do anything but follow the law?

If the coroner could not be compelled, I decided I would have to go higher and call his boss, the Director of the Rhode Island Department of Health. I conveyed the details of this heart-wrenching story and explained that it would save the family so much grief if the coroner could just release the body. The Director understood the situation and was sympathetic so he offered to call the coroner and instruct him to release the boy's body. I then called a funeral parlor director and asked to meet at nine the next morning to pick up the boy's body.

The next morning the hearse rolled up to the coroner's office. As it pulled up I had a bad feeling that our problems were not yet behind us. I was right to be suspicious, as when the doors to the hearse opened and we moved to begin the proceedings, the coroner, not content with the outcome of this messy bureaucratic debacle, blocked the entrance and refused to release the body. He had changed his mind, against instruction from the Director of the Department of Health himself, and insisted that an autopsy was still necessary. You cannot imagine the look of horror on the mother's face when the coroner refused to release her son's body.

In a state of disbelief, I resorted to the only option I thought was left: I marched two blocks over to the Rhode Island State House itself and, without having an appointment, walked in to see Governor Bruce Sundlun. To his everlasting credit, the Governor patiently listened to the whole unfortunate set of events. He agreed that the body should be released and that it was unacceptable to draw out the mother's grief in such an inappropriate manner. In this case the Jewish Governor believed that personal beliefs should trump archaic state law. Jewish customs are often similar to Islam's, so he could understand the particular grief of this mother. Together we drove to the coroner's office so he could hear from the Governor himself that the body was to be released.

That morning, I promised this mother that I would do something about Black children drowning. Her son had died because he did not know how to swim, something that is all too common

in the African American community. Many Americans die from drowning due to the inability to perform this basic life skill, and since seventy percent of African Americans cannot swim they consistently drown at a disproportionate rate. Twenty-two years later I am as good as my word.

In past years I have been busy grappling with some of the most pressing health and wellness disparities between African Americans and the larger community. Statistics show that almost across the board – including breast cancer, stroke, obesity, diabetes, and heart disease – African Americans are disproportionately affected, have poorer health outcomes, and face many unfavorable odds in trying to successfully treat and live with their illness. Swimming is no different from these, and that is why, with the help of my colleague Dylan Molho, I am turning to the wellness disparity in swimming. Though African Americans make up just thirteen percent of the US population, the fatal drowning rate of African American children aged five to fourteen is three times that of white children. Since seventy percent of African Americans do not know how to swim, many die the death of that unfortunate young man twenty-two years ago because of the lack of a skill that they could have easily acquired if given the resources and governmental and community encouragement that other youths receive.

There are nearly ten drowning deaths each day in America – the second leading cause of accidental death in children. Many of these tragic deaths could easily be prevented by offering all young people the opportunity to learn to swim. It is for this reason that we founded Swim Empowerment, a new major effort to empower a new generation of swimmers in the African American Rhode Island community. This ambitious plan is a ten-year-long project to address the specific needs for access to swimming and education in Rhode Island's African American community. It is an enormous undertaking, as our goal is to teach thirty thousand young Rhode Islanders, mostly from the African American community, how to swim. Many people think of swimming as a pleasurable exercise or leisurely activity, and it is. But not knowing how to swim may be the reason someone doesn't get a job as a police officer, firefighter, or emergency responder. It can be the reason someone is excluded

from social events and has to forgo important communal or familial activities. Worst of all, it can be the cause of unfortunate and preventable deaths.

Since February I have been reading YMCA manuals on how to teach lifeguards to save drowning swimmer's lives and guides from national swim organizations on how to teach reluctant swimmers. This past June I was joined by Dylan Molho, who has become equally invested in learning what the barriers are for aspiring swimmers in the African American community and finding permanent solutions to overcome them. The many obstacles preventing most people in the African American community from learning to swim are complex. There are many historical, cultural, psychological, and socioeconomic factors at work. To overcome these barriers we must work together in the Rhode Island community so that we may value the lives of each of our citizens. To realize our goal we will need many resources: hundreds of swim coaches, a thousand mentors, a staff recruiter for young people, a recruiter to address the particular needs of women, a coordinator to run the program, a staff member to convince the pool owners – hotel or college – to allow us to have access to their pools. Perhaps most importantly, we need every policymaker in the state behind us to help save lives and to create a culture that includes swimming as a wellness opportunity for thousands of African Americans.

The creation of this report has been a full time endeavor for four months. It has permitted me and Dylan to begin major dialogues with the public and hopefully with philanthropists who will be integral in financing for at least the first year of this program. Our goal is to receive major funding from national foundations for years two through ten of Swim Empowerment. Throughout my entire life I have normally taken a problem and stayed with it for seven to twenty years. I do not start something I don't finish. With Dylan Molho's help and with yours, we are going to eliminate the wellness disparity in swimming.

This may be the first time in the nation that we have the chance to address a problem that almost exclusively affects African Americans. The problems that the Black community contends with have

never been dealt with effectively and directly compared to issues impacting the broader population. Swim Empowerment presents an unprecedented opportunity to do so and Swim Empowerment will serve as a model for the nation for future projects of similar scope and ambition.

This may be the major undertaking of my life. I hope you will get deeply involved to help Dylan and myself teach thirty thousand Rhode Islanders how to swim. Together we can be a model for the nation in showing that with enough support, we can value each of our citizens equally by creating a healthier and more well rounded population and prevent the needless loss of life. So join us. After all, I promised a *mother*.

Sincerely,

*Ray Rickman,  
President and Founder  
Swim Empowerment*

## Part 1: The Historical Development of the African American Swimming Disparity

In Youngstown, Ohio, a Little League baseball team had won the 1951 city championship and decided to celebrate at the local pool. Coaches, players, parents, and siblings showed up at the pool, but not all were admitted. One player, Al Bright, was denied entrance because he was Black. The lifeguards forced him to sit on the lawn outside the fence as everyone else played in the pool. The unwritten rule was clear; one guard told the coach, “Negroes are not permitted in the pool area.” After an hour had passed, several parents pleaded with the guards to let Al into the pool for at least a couple minutes. Finally, the supervisor relented. Al could “enter” the pool as long as everyone else got out and he sat inside a rubber raft. As his teammates and other bystanders looked on, a lifeguard pushed him once around the pool. “Just don't touch the water,” the guard constantly reminded him, “whatever you do, don't touch the water.”<sup>1</sup>

The pervasive problem of the African American swimming rate disparity is an issue with a long history, one rooted in practices of systematic oppression. The modern reality the African American community faces is a lower rate of swimming ability and a higher rate of drowning, which has tragically affected countless families. According to a 2008 University of Memphis study commissioned by USA Swimming, 70% of African American children do not know how to swim.<sup>2</sup> As well, drowning is the second leading cause of childhood unintentional death for children under the age of 14, and African American children are more than three times likely to die of drowning than their white peers.<sup>3</sup> When we seek to understand the causes of this disparity, we cannot simply look to presently existing forces that act as barriers to African Americans from swimming. Instead we must expand our scope of

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1 Wiltse, Jeff *Contested Waters* University of North Carolina Press, 2007 page 1

2 Irwin, C. et al. “Constraints Impacting Minority Swimming Participation”, *Department of Health and Sport Sciences*, University of Memphis, presented to USA Swimming (2008)

3 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS) [online]. [cited 2012 May 3]. Available from: URL: <http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars>.

observation and analysis, and look to the past to discover more fully the connected causal network that lies behind these figures.

With this wider perspective, we will show that this modern disparity in swimming rates lies in stark contrast to a past in which Africans and African Americans had a strong and thriving culture of swimming as a recreational activity as well as a means to access a number of jobs connected to the water. This culture of swimming, however, did not last. Through the very direct policies and practices of our American society, this proficiency in swimming has been almost extinguished from the African American community. The startling statistics stated above are the result of a legacy wherein African Americans were banned from swimming during slavery and consistently denied access to pools during the time of Nation-wide segregation.

Tracing the history of Blacks back to Africa shows a vastly different picture. The current state of affairs with 70% of African Americans not knowing how to swim vs. approximately 80% of Caucasians who can swim is a contrast that developed slowly. In fact, the opposite used to be true, with Africans and early African Americans being some of the finest swimmers in the world, while Whites rarely learned how to swim.

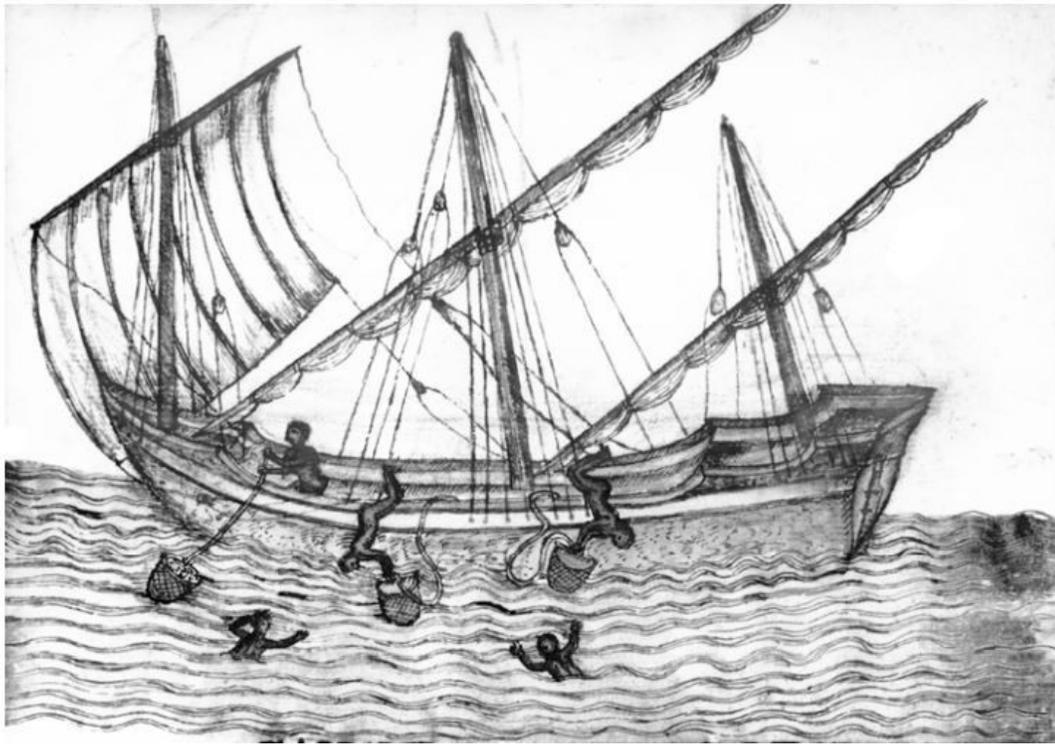
Long before a single coastal or interior West African was enslaved and cargoed off to toil the length of their days under the skies of the New World, many had become adept swimmers and underwater divers. West Africans often grew up along riverbanks, near lakes, or close to the ocean. In those waterways, many became proficient swimmers, incorporating this skill into their work and recreation.<sup>4</sup>

On the west coast of Africa, from Senegal to Angola, the Europeans discovered African people who were by all accounts, expert watermen and “the best swimmers in the world.” The Europeans attributed these extraordinary swimming skills to constant exercise and “from being brought up, both men and

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4 Kevin Dawson, *Enslaved Swimmers and Divers in the Atlantic World* Journal of American History March 2008, p. 1327

women from infancy, to swim like fishes.”<sup>5</sup>



From the age of discovery up through the nineteenth century, the swimming and underwater diving abilities of African people often surpassed those of Europeans and their descendants.<sup>6</sup> On many occasions when a boat or ship sank, the Africans abroad would often be the only ones capable of swimming; Whites would usually drown unless graciously saved by the Africans.<sup>7</sup> The Africans would be similarly relied on to recover lost cargo, which due to their great diving skills could yield the Africans praise and reward for the successful return of valuables.<sup>8</sup> In every major port city, such as Havana, Veracruz and Caragena, teams of enslaved African underwater divers were kept aboard salvage vessels ready to depart on short notice to recover treasure lost in shipwrecks.

The ability to swim was not limited to the men of African tribes of coastal villages. While

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5 Dawson (2008) page 1335

6 Dawson, 1327

7 Olaudah Equiano, *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, esp. 54, 79

8 Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa: Performed under the Direct Patronage of the African Association, in the Years 1795, 1796, and 1797* (1799; New York 1971), 71–72

Western swimming practices typically did not include women, many African women swam adeptly.<sup>9</sup> Western standards of modesty did not tolerate public disrobing by White women, and because swimming nude was common, women avoided the activity altogether. African women were not constrained by such cultural limits. A traveling scholar, Robert Rattray, wrote in the early twentieth century that Asante women were “as expert as the men, and this I quite believe, as I used to see whole family parties alternately wading and swimming along the lake shore instead of following the road running between the villages.”<sup>10</sup> Swimming was a familial activity, as many coastal Africans learned to swim very young, sometimes right after learning to walk between the ages of ten to fourteen months.<sup>11</sup> “Once the children begin to walk by themselves, they soon go to the water in order to learn how to swim and to walk in the water.”<sup>12</sup>

As Africans were taken to the New World, many of them brought swimming and their diving skills with them. While most people today associate slavery with fields of cotton and tobacco, enslaved African swimmers were essential to early colonization of the Americas. African swimmers taught the colonists maritime skills and new or more effective ways to hunt whales and catch fish, crabs, and clams. They earned great fortunes for their owners by harvesting rich pearl beds. Escaped slaves and free Blacks able to swim found economic opportunities in the merchant and whaling fleets of the northern states. In 1863, African Americans made up 25% of the Union Navy. Paul Cuffee, son of an African born slave who earned his freedom in Westport, Massachusetts, joins the whaling fleets at 16, rises to the rank of captain and became America's first Black millionaire.

Swimming was also an essential part of the recreation of slaves. Whether organized by slaves themselves or by slaveholders, slaves of both sexes competed in swimming contests. In Guiana

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9 De Marees, *Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea*, (1987) trans. Van Dantzig and Jones, 186

10 David Northrup, *Africa's Discovery of Europe, 1450–1850* (Oxford, 2002), 14

11 Dawson, 1335

12 Bosman, *New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea*, 121–22

during the 1770s, John Stedman observed that swimming was slaves' "favourite diversion, which they practise [*sic*] every day at least twice or thrice." Dawson notes

Slaves' swimming habits extended beyond such impromptu amusements. Bondpeople and scholars have discussed slaves' competitive sporting activities, including boxing and wrestling matches and foot, horse, and canoe races. They have contended that such activities could enhance self-esteem and make enslavement more bearable. Many slaveholders believed that sports allowed slaves to vent their frustrations without threatening the stability of slavery.<sup>13</sup>

In more extreme cases, some slaves even fused swimming to blood sports when they fought sharks, alligators and manta rays to amuse themselves or their owners, and to demonstrate their skill and strength.<sup>14</sup>

In 18<sup>th</sup> Century America, it is estimated as many as 80% of Blacks knew how to swim while only 20% of Whites could.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, this higher rate of swimming proficiency did not remain. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, as it became known that the ability to swim could be used to escape from slavery, many slave owners prohibited slaves from swimming, and made a very conscious effort to remove the ability from the community entirely. In the text *Born in Bondage*, the historian Marie Jenkins Schwartz from University of Rhode Island asserted that slaveholders prevented their slaves from learning to swim because they felt swimming did not increase slaves' economic value, as well it potentially aided them in escaping. Knowing that they could lose a valuable human property due to their slaves' propensity to swim, slave owners began taking drastic steps to protect their property. One of these steps was to instill a fear of the water by dunking disobedient slaves in water until they nearly drowned and by creating fear through stories of creatures living in the water. Particularly in the antebellum South, depriving African Americans of that skill was a way of controlling their ability to escape repression.

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13 Dawson (2008) p. 1340

14 Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "The Mask of Obedience: Male Slave Psychology in the Old South," *American Historical Review*, 93 (Dec. 1988), 1228–52

15 Dawson (2008) p. 1345

After the Civil War, when Jim Crow laws created a segregated society, Whites excluded Blacks from beaches and segregated swimming pools, which were built in nearly every city and small town in America. The pools of this era were enormous aquatic playgrounds that became the epicenter of summer social life for White society.

Municipal swimming pools were extraordinarily popular during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. Cities throughout the country built thousands of pools – many of them larger than football fields – and adorned them with sand beaches, concrete decks, and grassy lawns. Tens of millions of Americans flocked to these public resorts to swim, sunbathe, and socialize. In 1933 an extensive survey of Americans' leisure-time activities conducted by the National Recreation Association found that as many people swam frequently as went to the movies. In other words, swimming was as much a part of Americans' lives as was going to the movies. Furthermore, Americans attached considerable cultural significance to swimming pools during this period. Pools became emblems of a new, distinctly modern version of the good life that valued leisure, pleasure, and beauty. They were, in short, an integral part of the kind of life Americans wanted to live.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Wiltse, *Contested Waters* p.5



In the summer of 1940, boys and girls saw a colorful silkscreen poster as they lined up to enter the grand new public swimming pools built across New York City During the New Deal. Through clever use of image and text, John Wagner, the graphic artist, promoted the Learn to Swim Campaign, run by the Department of Parks of youngsters of all ages. Notice, however, the clear demarcation between the children of different skin tones. The juxtaposition of black and white children is widely interpreted as evidence that racial segregation prevailed in New York's new pools during the New Deal.<sup>17</sup>

National Learn-to-Swim campaigns, offering free lessons, were launched, while African Americans

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<sup>17</sup> Marta Gutman "Race, Place, and Play: Robert Moses and the WPA Swimming Pools in New York City" *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 67, No. 4 (December 2008) pp. 532-561.

were, for the most part, kept off the beaches and out of the water. In the late nineteenth century, however, determined Blacks found ways to enjoy leisure, and this often irritated Whites. Such “conflict” provided part of the backdrop for the famous *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision of 1896 which institutionalized segregation in public accommodations until 1954.<sup>18</sup> Prosperous Blacks from New Orleans were arranging large group excursions by rail to resort areas along the Gulf Coast. The presence of significant numbers of well-dressed Blacks enjoying themselves offended some Whites, who pressured the railroads to enforce state segregation laws. In response, a group of well-connected Blacks, supported by liberal White friends, sued the railroads. This eventually led to the famous decision, which allowed “separate but equal” public accommodations.<sup>19</sup> However, “colored” pools very rarely met the standard of being “separate but equal.” Where communities did provide swimming facilities for Blacks, they were typically little more than shallow wading pools, without the amenities and attractions found at White pools.

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18 Mark S. Foster *In the Face of “Jim Crow”: Prosperous Blacks and Vacations, Travel and Outdoor Leisure, 1890-1945* *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 84, No. 2 (Spring, 1999) pp. 130-149

19 See Charles A. Lofgren, *The Plessy Case: A Legal-Historical Perspective* (New York, 1987)



(Above: African American swimmers at Colonial Park Pool, 16 August 1937 )

Black Americans challenged segregation by repeatedly seeking admission to Whites-only pools and by filing lawsuits against their cities. Throughout their history, municipal pools served as stages for social conflict. With the possible exception of Miami, and the establishment of the Virginia Key “Colored Beach,” virtually every attempt to integrate swimming pools and beaches resulted in violence, even after the Supreme Court overruled segregation with the landmark decision of *Brown vs. Board of Education*. Latent social tensions often erupted into violence at swimming pools because they were community meeting places, where Americans came into intimate and prolonged contact with one another. People who might otherwise come in no closer contact than passing on the street, now waited

in line together, undressed next to one another, and shared the same water. The visual and physical intimacy that accompanied swimming made municipal pools intensely contested civic spaces. Americans fought over where pools should be built, who should be allowed to use them, and how they should be used.<sup>20</sup>



(Above: White and Black swimmers at Fairgrounds Park Pool, St. Louis, Mo., 21 June 1949 . The Department of Public Welfare in St. Louis announced the municipal pools would be desegregated and, on the morning of 21 June, a NAACP official and a Catholic priest escorted a small group of Black boys into the pool, past a much larger crowd of jeering, White teenagers . By the evening, Whites were attacking Blacks throughout the neighborhood with baseball bats, knives, and lead

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<sup>20</sup> Wiltse, *Contested Waters* pg 9-13

pipes. The riot lasted for two days, notwithstanding the presence of one hundred police officers)

Eventually, these social and legal protests desegregated municipal pools throughout the North, but desegregation rarely led to meaningful interracial swimming. With the start of integration and its accompanying racial tensions, the idyllic “Golden Age of Swimming” ended for Whites. When Black Americans gained equal access to Northern municipal pools, White swimmers generally abandoned them for private pools. Desegregation was a primary cause of the proliferation of private swimming pools that occurred after the mid-1950s. By the 1970s and 1980s, tens of millions of mostly White middle-class Americans swam in their backyards or at suburban club pools, while mostly African and Latino Americans swam at inner-city municipal pools. In 1950 there were only about 2,500 swimming pools at private homes in the United States. By the end of the century there were 4 million back yard pools.<sup>21</sup> Throughout the North when the courts ordered the desegregation of public swimming pools,



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21 Wiltse, Jeff “Troubled Waters: The Racial History of Swimming in the United States,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, No. 55 (Spring, 2007), pp. 94-95

Whites stayed away in droves. City governments, in turn, stopped providing adequate funding to the public pools. In a short time many of the municipal pools fell into disrepair or were closed.<sup>22</sup> As a result, the rich tradition of swimming was excised from the African American culture.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid. pg 95

## Part 2: The Current Barriers to Learning How to Swim

The present is the legacy left to us from the past. While legally enforced segregation may have been overturned, these historical practices have manifested themselves in the social structures and practices that continue to lessen the well-being and the life-satisfaction of Blacks in America. The present we face is one where the African American community does not swim, and does not see swimming as a desirable outlet for recreation, or as a necessary life-skill. Their long exclusion from public pool facilities and beaches has had a significant effect on the African American culture.

What we see today are a number of diverse barriers that have been created from the variables of the past, which now act as deterrents, preventing African Americans from learning how to swim. Instilled in the culture of African Americans is a wide-spread fear of getting into bodies of water and fear of swimming. This fear is likely not a form of aquaphobia, the specific fear of water, but a more general fear of the unknown and environments that have not been experienced. While this may be the single greatest barrier that stands in the way of individuals swimming, other variables coalesce to create a number of separate barriers that sustain this disparity.

These barriers have infiltrated every aspect of the African American culture, even within family dynamics and personal beliefs. As habits are transmitted by generations through families, a parent's inability to swim is conveyed to children as a belief that swimming is not a suitable activity or necessary skill. With the adoption of a culture of non-participation in swimming, many false stereotypes have grown around the fact that many Blacks do not swim. In the minds of many people, African Americans included, the true and contingent fact that Blacks *do not* swim has been conflated with the entirely false claim that Blacks *can not* swim. Many believe that due to a greater bone density of Blacks, or a lower fat content, that Blacks cannot *in principle* learn how to swim.

These claims of physical distinctions between races, while based on a modicum of physical fact,

do not give weight to any conclusions about higher or lower potentials of learning how to swim. We have sought to examine and determine the exact nature of the possible differences in average physical traits between races in order to ascertain the veracity of such claims about the swimming ability of an entire race. However, even before any scientific studies are referenced, one can refer to the long history of Africans and African Americans who were highly-skilled swimmers, which will quickly make one dubious of any claims about the correlation between race and lower swimming capacities. Or, one can simply look at the examples of Olympic-level African Americans that compete in swimming today, such as celebrated athletes Cullen Jones and Lia Neal.

Unfortunately, the barriers that continue to protract an unnecessary disparity are often psychological in nature, so that internalized attitudes within the African American community create stronger deterrents than physical traits ever would. In fact, the emotional confidence of African Americans is constantly under-attack due to the mental pressures of dealing with stereotypes, prejudices, and other perceived antagonisms. When any person is placed within a foreign environment or attempting a new skill, confidence is a major component in how successful that individual will be in adapting or learning. If the confidence is replaced by anxiety or doubts, than failure in learning a skill is much more likely to occur due to frustrations and lowered concentration.

Other subtle barriers can occur from issues as complex as personal identity and bodily insecurities, so that one would be embarrassed or afraid of wearing a bathing suit in public. While this is a universal concern for anyone trying to swim, there has been a specific pressure on non-White groups to adapt and conform to Western standards of beauty and fashion, which glorifies certain body types, hairstyles, and even skin colors. Due to the cultural hegemony of the Western world, many African American and other minorities attempt to assimilate to standards that force radical changes in style and physical appearance. If individuals do not meet these Western standards of beauty, it is possible that they will feel insecure in their looks, so much so as to avoid going swimming. Even

hairstyles become a major factor in this problem as many African American women spend much attention and care on maintaining hair in a form that is difficult to achieve naturally. In order to preserve such hairstyles, many African American girls and women avoid water completely due to worries of damaging their hair and the difficulties of recreating their particular styles.

Lastly, lack of access to swimming facilities and instruction serves as the most immediate barrier to those who would otherwise wish to learn how to swim. It is well known that Blacks have inherited a substantial wealth disparity, placing many in the African American population well below the average household earnings of other races.<sup>23</sup> Due to this lower socioeconomic status, many African Americans cannot afford access to private clubs and swimming facilities, or may not have the ability to secure proper transportation to public facilities. With most public facilities being funded less and less over time, the capacity to use freely accessible pools is lessening, despite the positive effects public recreational facilities have in lowering crime rates and strengthening communities.

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<sup>23</sup> 2012 3rd Quarter: Bureau of Labor Statistics – 16 Years or Older & 2011 Census, Bureau American Community Survey

## Anthropometrics and Racial Swimming Capacity

In 1942, during the height of racial segregation in the United States and Nazi eugenics in Europe, anthropologist Ashley Montagu proposed a then-groundbreaking theory of race: that racial categorizations are largely social constructions with little to no basis in biological fact.<sup>24</sup> The seven decades since have issued integration, the expansion of Civil Rights, and a steady dismantlement of eugenics' validity through social, philosophical, and biological scholarship. However, the deep-seated, systemic challenges of attitude have been much more difficult to uproot than those of unjust policy and erroneous scientific theories. The lingering beliefs of American prejudice are the consequence of our extensive history of discrimination. This is the case even in Rhode Island, a seemingly progressive place compared to other parts of the country. It bears remembering, after all, that the “State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations” had one of the longest and most unequally profitable hands in the New England slave trade.

Despite relative progress in society, deeply held opinions of genetically determined racial differences in behavior, aptitude, and physical ability persist, and continue to groundlessly (if unofficially) exclude African Americans from such activities as swimming. Perhaps the most nationally visible example of this thoughtless athletic prejudice came in 1987, when Al Campanis, general manager of the Los Angeles Dodgers, shared on an episode of *Nightline*: “Why are Black men or Black people not good swimmers? Because they don’t have the buoyancy.”

Under intense public scrutiny for this and other comments – that Black individuals inherently lack the skills and motivation for attaining sports management positions, for example – Campanis resigned two days later. Commentators winced at the poor timing of his remarks, 40 years to the day from Jackie Robinson’s commitment to the previously all-White Brooklyn Dodgers. The *New York*

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<sup>24</sup> Montagu, Ashley. *Man’s Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race*. Sixth Edition. Rowan & Littlefield, 1997.

*Times* Editorial Board observed that Campanis' "unwitting prejudice offers evidence of a color bar that may be every bit as hard to overcome as the blatant one Jackie Robinson conquered."<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, the implied color bar remains evident today in ongoing biologized claims of racial difference and, as a result, in the expressed attitudes of Black individuals to whom this information is often erroneously translated and transmitted. Jon Entine, founder and director of the Genetic Literacy Project, writes in his book *Taboo: Why Black Athletes Dominate Sports and Why We're Afraid to Talk About It*: "I don't think there's any question that there are physiological factors to help us understand why no African American has ever even qualified for the U.S. Olympic swim or diving team" – a point disproven by the record-breaking and medal-winning participation of Anthony Ervin, Cullen Jones, and Maritza Correia in Olympic Games since 2000. "Blacks are considered 'sinkers'," Entine suggests. "Numerous studies over many decades have consistently shown that Blacks have denser skeletons and that elite Black male athletes have lower levels of body fat than Whites or Asians."<sup>26</sup>

Entine's questionable citations date to 1973 and 1974, though more recent studies of race relative to bone mineral density<sup>27 28</sup> and other body composition metrics<sup>29 30</sup> have been conducted to examine allegedly biological foundations of racial difference. In particular, one study found that young African American men aged 18 to 32 years old had a mean measured body density (1.075 gm/cc) that was higher than the average mean body density of White males (1.065 gm/cc).<sup>31</sup> This is related to the fact that Blacks have consistently been found to have on average denser bones and heavier skeletal

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25 The New York Times Editorial Board. *Topics of the Times; A Different Color Bar*. 1987.

26 Entine, Jon. *Taboo: Why Black Athletes Dominate Sports and Why We're Afraid to Talk About It*. Public Affairs, 2001.

27 Ettinger, B. et al. "Racial differences in bone density between young adult black and white subjects persist after adjustment for anthropometric, lifestyle, and biochemical differences." *Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism*. 1997 Feb; 82(2): 429-34.

28 Hochberg, Marc C. *Racial Differences in Bone Strength*. Transactions of the American Clinical and Climatological Association. 2007; 118: 305-315.

29 Wagner, Dale R. and V.H. Heyward. *Measures of body composition in blacks and whites: a comparative review*. American Journal of Clinical Nutrition. 1999 Nov; 71(6): 1392 – 1402.

30 Levin, Michael. *The Race Concept: A Defense*. Behavior & Philosophy. 2002; Vol. 30: 21-42.

31 Vickery, Susan R. et al. "Prediction of Body Density from Skinfolts in Black and White Young Men." *Human Biology*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (February 1988), p. 135

mass than Whites<sup>32 33</sup>, which could increase the overall density of the fat-free body (FFB), and therefore the total body density independent of any differences in body fatness. A further difference between Blacks and Whites in fat patterning has also been reported: Blacks tend to have relatively less fat on the extremities than on the trunk compared to Whites.<sup>34 35</sup>

The application of this research as it pertains to swimming ability, however, is specious on two levels. First, as Entine himself admits, “the effect of these differences on swimming performances has not been conclusively demonstrated” – though, he rather obliquely extrapolates, “it is not unreasonable to assume they have some measurable impact.” The absence of confirmed causation, however, *does* render Entine’s claim unreasonable, especially considering the range of racially-unbound factors which have been proven to affect swimming: somatotype<sup>36</sup> and body mass index<sup>37</sup>, for example. Intentionally or not, Entine’s speculation only serves as an exploitable suggestion that reinforces false views of racial superiority and inferiority.

At a second level, research that ascribes racial difference to genetic or intrinsic determination is fundamentally dangerous, as Montagu demonstrated in 1942, and as numerous scholars have evidenced since.<sup>38 39</sup> In her investigation of the bone density literature, for example, Brown University Professor of Biology Anne Fausto-Sterling observes that much more significant bone density variation occurs

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32 Baker, P.T. And J.L. Angel “Old Age Changes in Bone Density: Sex and Race Factors in the United States.” *Human Biology*, (1965) Vol. 37: 104-119

33 Merz, A. L. et al. “Estimation of skeletal weight in the living” *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* (1956) Vol. 14: 589-609

34 Harsha, D.W. et al. “Racial differences in subcutaneous fat patterns in children aged 7-15 years.” *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, (1980) Vol. 50: 261-280

35 Mueller, W.H. et al. “Fat patterning in athletes in relation to ethnic origin and sport.” *Annals of Human Biology* (1982) Vol. 9: 371-376

36 Siders, W.A. et al. “Relationships Among Swimming Performance, Body Composition, and Somatotype in Competitive Collegiate Swimmers.” *USDA National Agricultural Library*. 1993 June; 33(2): 166 – 171.

37 Jurimae, J. et al. “Analysis of Swimming Performance from Physical, Physiological, and Biomechanical Parameters in Young Swimmers.” *Pediatric Exercise Science*. 2007; 19: 70 – 81.

38 Ossorio, Pilar and Troy Duster. Race and genetics: “Controversies in biomedical, behavioral, and forensic sciences.” *American Psychologist*. 2005 Jan; 60(1): 115-128.

39 Rosenberg, NA; Pritchard, JK; Weber, JL; Cann, HM; Kidd, KK; Zhivotovsky, LA; Feldman, MW. “Genetic structure of human populations.” *Science*. 2002; 298(5602): 2381–2385

*within* racial groups – too much so for the reliable citation of a racial group’s “average” – while more consistent and statistically significant patterns occur through environment, cultural practices, and diet.<sup>40</sup> The modern availability of data from the Human Genome Project has further called into question the practice of genetic characterization by groups, racial or otherwise. As Witherspoon et al. observe:

The fact that, given enough genetic data, individuals can be correctly assigned to their populations of origin is compatible with the observation that most human genetic variation is found within populations, not between them. It is also compatible with our finding that, even when the most distinct populations are considered and hundreds of loci are used, individuals are frequently more similar to members of other populations than to members of their own population.<sup>41</sup>

Despite the growing evidence that racial groups are not biologically advantaged or disadvantaged against one another, long-standing myths have proven difficult to shake. An informal, anecdotally conducted survey illustrates the issue. Among a recent gathering of nine African American academics in Providence, each with a Ph.D., only two indicated they were able to swim. Why had the remaining seven avoided swimming lessons in their youth and through their lives? Each expressed the belief that African Americans’ “heavier bone density” made them ill-designed for water.

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40 Fausto-Sterling, Anne. “The Bare Bones of Race.” *Social Studies of Science*. 2008 Oct; 38(5): 657-694.

41 Witherspoon, D.J. et. al “Genetic Similarities Within and Between Human Populations.” *Genetics*. 2007 May; 176(1): 351-359.

## Fear of Water and Swimming

“A lot of African Americans and Latinos don’t swim because their parents don’t swim, they don’t encourage it,” a Boston parent shared, when asked to explain under-participation of minorities in the sport of swimming, and even in basic swimming lessons. “I think we need to educate the parents on the importance of swimming as a life saving skill. You know they just don’t really value swimming as an important life saving skill. Because they didn’t swim.”

Another African American mother in Minneapolis/St. Paul spoke more specifically of her fear, “I’m scared ... while it’s the cost, I’m scared ... I’m scared for her, but she’s not afraid.”<sup>42</sup>

A 2010 study led by Professor Carol Irwin and the Department of Health and Sport Sciences at the University of Memphis indicates that these parental apprehensions very likely inculcate African American children with similar feelings of discomfort about swimming.<sup>43</sup> In a survey conducted during this study, African American respondents reported significantly less agreement than White respondents on the following statements, all of which predict swimming ability:

- Swimming is an activity that I enjoy doing
- My parents/caregivers encourage me to swim
- Most members of my family know how to swim
- My best friends like to swim
- My best friends are good swimmers

Conversely, African American respondents much more frequently reported fears of drowning

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42 Both quotations from Irwin, Carol and R. Irwin, N. Martin, and S. Ross. “Constraints Impacting Minority Swimming Participation: Phase II.” *The University of Memphis Department of Health & Sport Sciences*, Presented to USA Swimming Foundation. May 2010.

43 Irwin, Carol et al. (2010)

and injury while swimming, which across all tested variables – including family income and access to a swimming facility – were most highly correlated with poor swimming ability.

Parents' fears hinder the development of children's swimming ability in a variety of ways, the most obvious being resistance to placing their children in swimming lessons. Furthermore, as the University of Memphis study suggests, this hindrance is perpetuated by the children themselves, who subsequently internalize the fears of their parents, so that non-participation in swimming becomes both externally and internally driven.

The behavioral inheritance of this fear may begin at a very young age, and even without conscious demonstration on the parent's part. Long-standing research indicates that parents may communicate their own personal water aversions through clear verbal expression (i.e. the admissions shared by parents above) but also through subtler cues – tensing one's body, or facially conveying discomfort, even if it is toward an experience as seemingly innocuous as water splashed upon the face.<sup>44</sup> Fear may develop from a mere lack of exposure as well, as children are likely to develop wariness of experiences and environments with which they are unfamiliar – especially as this under-exposure leaves them tactically under-prepared.<sup>45</sup>

More recent research has investigated the specific mechanics of fear and confidence in development. The most widely agreed-upon model<sup>46 47</sup> holds that:

1. When exposed to an unfamiliar stimulus or environment, such as water, children attune themselves to the behavioral responses of their closest models – in many cases, parents

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44 Smith, M. "A Decision Regarding Organized Swimming Programs for Preschool Children." Presented at the *CNCA Workshop Seminar*, Arizona. 1974.

45 Fleming, PM and D Reynolds, L Kindig. "Systematic Desensitization Techniques: A Means of Modifying Behavior in Fearful College-Age Non-Swimmers." Project funded by CNCA. Temple University.

46 Catmur, C and V Walsh, C Heyes. "Associative Sequence Learning: The Role of Experience in the Development of Imitation and the Mirror System." *Philosophical Transactions: Biological Sciences*. 2009 Aug; 364(1528): 2369 – 2380.

47 Hofmann, Stefan G. "Cognitive Processes during Fear Acquisition and Extinction in Animals and Humans." *Clinical Psychology Review*. 2008 Feb; 28(2): 199 – 210.

and siblings.

2. With each successive exposure to the environment, children strive to imitate the observed sensorimotor response, such as swimming.
3. The strengthening of this sensorimotor ability develops, over time, into a physically felt confidence and internally perceived safety. The deficiency of observed and learned behavior develops, on the other hand, into a physically felt vulnerability and internally perceived danger.

In the case of African Americans' under-participation in swimming, this results in a self-propagating paradigm: as the fear of drowning deepens, an individual becomes less likely to enroll in swimming instruction – and as instruction becomes further delayed, or avoided entirely, the true risk of drowning significantly increases.

This promotes a powerful case for early swim instruction, and is additionally bolstered by the research on actual drowning prevention. A 2009 study, for example, of the “Association Between Swimming Lessons and Drowning in Childhood” found an 88% reduction of drowning risk among young children with past participation in formal swimming lessons.<sup>48</sup> A 2009 American Red Cross review of the literature similarly found that swimming lessons initiated at age 4, and aquatic readiness programs earlier than that, were strongly correlated with lower drowning rates after age 5.<sup>49</sup>

After age 5, incidentally, racial disparities in childhood drowning rates become most pronounced – a fact which cannot go unnoticed, given the low enrollment of young African Americans

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48 Brenner, Ruth A. and GS Taneja, DL Haynie, AC Trumble, C Qian, RM Klinger, MA Klebanoff. “Association Between Swimming Lessons and Drowning in Childhood.” *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*. 2009 Mar; 163(3): 203 – 210.

49 “Minimum Age for Swimming Lessons.” Scientific Review by *The American Red Cross Advisory Council on First Aid, Aquatics, Safety, and Preparedness*. 2009 June.

in swimming instruction.<sup>50</sup> Engaging young children in learn-to-swim programs is, if not a total panacea, at least a clearly valuable life-saving measure. But what is to be done for the thousands of older children – and adults – whose fears of drowning have become more entrenched with passing time?

Fortunately, exposure therapy has rendered highly successful extinction of individuals' fears and anxieties. By continuing to expose individuals to the object or condition of fear, and by demonstrating the non-threat that object or condition may pose, fear gradually erodes.<sup>51</sup> It can even give way to confidence and achievement – a possibility perfectly embodied in the near-drowning experience which launched Cullen Jones into swim lessons and, years after that, to an Olympic gold medal.

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50 Brenner, R and The Committee on Injury, Violence, and Poison Prevention. "Prevention of Drowning in Infants, Children, and Adolescents." *Pediatrics*. 2003; 112(440): 440 – 445.

51 Davis, M and K Myers, K Ressler, B Rothbaum. *Facilitation of Extinction of Conditioned Fear by D-Cycloserine*. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*. 2005 Aug;

## Race, Body Image, and Swimming

Another issue in swimming for African Americans may be insecurities about body image. Those with certain insecurities may be uncomfortable revealing their body to others and be resistant to wearing proper swimming attire. A major factor in body insecurity is obesity, which is often socially stigmatized. Obesity disproportionately affects minority groups, as recent national data show that 82.1 percent of Black women and 75.7 percent of Hispanic women are overweight or obese when compared to 59.5 percent of White women.<sup>52</sup> In addition, more than half of Black women are obese compared to just 38.8 percent of Black men and 32.2 percent of White women.<sup>53</sup>

This issue is not entirely straightforward, as racial identity and body image have a complex relationship. A 1999 statistical study by Becker *et al.* demonstrated that while African American and White men share a similar ideal body size, African American women consistently idealize a larger body size compared to White women. That same study also reveals that African American men display a preference for a larger body size in the opposite sex compared to White men. The authors of the report remark, “body image sizes for current self, ideal self, and ideal for the opposite sex were all significantly greater in African Americans.”<sup>54</sup> A 2004 report from Northwestern State University found that this seemingly race-based attitude towards ideal body size for both oneself and the opposite sex is found across different socioeconomic class and age groups.<sup>55</sup> The authors firmly attribute this ideal body image to racial identity beliefs.

Becker *et al.* conclude that this presents challenges in ameliorating obesity, its attendant

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52 Ogden, C. L., Carroll, M. D., Kit, B.K., and Flegal, K. M., “Prevalence of Obesity and Trends in Body Mass Index Among U.S. Children and Adolescents, 1999-2010.” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 307 no. 5 (2012): 483-490.

53 Ogden et al, (2012)

54 Becker, D. M., Yanek LR, Koffman D. M., and Bronner Y. C., “Body Image Preferences Among Urban African Americans and Whites from Low Income Communities.” *Ethnicity and Disease* 9 no. 3 (1999): 377-86.

55 Meshreki, Lotus M. and Catherine E. Hansen, “African American Men’s Female Body Size Preferences Based on Racial Identity and Environment.” *Journal of Black Psychology* 30 no. 4 (2004): 451-476.

diseases, and body image insecurities. This problem is especially acute in African American women in low socioeconomic communities and calls for “a shift in social norms” and the design of “community-based” and “ethnic-specific interventions” for different ethnic groups.<sup>56</sup> If body image expectations vary differently among different ethnic groups, interventions in teaching swimming must take this into accord. Community organizers and swimming instructors must be cognizant of different attitudes towards body image and insecurities while positively encouraging a healthy lifestyle and strong swimming skills. Above all, efforts should be made to encourage positive body image while swimming. Those insecure about their bodies – for whatever reason – may be less likely to fully engage in swimming lessons and will be at a disadvantage as future swimmers.

Besides body image, hair is another important factor to consider when encouraging swimming in the African American community. Many African American women and girls may be reluctant to swim due to feelings of discomfort about getting their hair wet, from both the physical discomfort swimming induces and the difficulty in maintaining their hair in the water. Despite the fact that African Americans comprise about 12 to 13 percent of the U.S. population, Black women spend three times as much as White women on their hair care.<sup>57</sup> This trend may, in part, be attributed to the fact that for many African Americans, hair is an important factor in determining racial identity and establishing pride in one’s appearance. Tracey Patton, writing in 2006, explains that “beauty is subject to the hegemonic standards of the ruling class” and “historically and into modern times African American beauty has been disparaged.”<sup>58</sup> Because of this, it is only logical that African Americans may become sensitive about their standards of beauty against the norms ingrained in society. As Patton writes, African American women’s hair often requires an elaborate process of styling that includes “washing,

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56 Becker et al (1999)

57 Wilson and Russell (1992)

58 Patton, Tracy Owens, “Hey Girl, Am I More than My Hair?: African American Women and Their Struggles with Beauty, Body Image, and Hair.” *NWSA Journal* 18 no. 2 (2006): 24-51.

combing, oiling, braiding, twisting, and/or decorating.”<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, there are widely different hairstyles available to women with such hair, making the process of choosing and maintaining a hairstyle an important part of their identity. Since hair is such an important priority in the African American standard of beauty, it is essentially vital to reassure African Americans with carefully styled hair that swimming is not detrimental to their hair care and is a worthwhile activity even for those concerned with their appearance.

The most extreme case of bodily insecurities is a psychological condition known as *body dysmorphic disorder*, which occurs when a person becomes obsessively concerned with body image.<sup>60</sup> This is manifested as a preoccupation with a perceived defect, real or imagined, with a person’s physical features. This condition can become so extreme that it causes psychological distress and impairs occupational or social functioning. Because of this, body dysmorphic disorder frequently co-occurs with depression and anxiety, social withdrawal or social isolation.<sup>61</sup>

Since all people face certain challenges about their body image, fashion, and social acceptance, it is necessary to keep in mind the African American community’s particular standards of beauty and points of insecurity. It is also vital to keep in mind that all individuals have their own standards of beauty and each of them has their own ideal body image that they may be sensitive about maintaining. Many may also wish to conceal their body from public view out of privacy or feelings of embarrassment. Nevertheless, swimming should be an inclusive activity for all, no matter the swimmer’s actual or ideal body image. As such, swimming instructors and community members should endeavor to be accepting and offer positive encouragement to all swimmers. The best way to illustrate the fact that swimming is for all – and is a necessary, rewarding, and sometimes life-saving skill – is to present many diverse role models with varying body images and appearances.

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59 Patton (2006)

60 Berrios, G. E., and Chung-Sing Kan, "A Conceptual and Quantitative Analysis of 178 Historical Cases of Dismorphophobia." *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica* 94 no. 1 (1996): 1–7.

61 *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*

## Race, Stereotype Threat, and Swimming

African Americans, like many other historically maligned groups, have to face very particular challenges when going about learning any new task. One reason for this is due to a discovered psychological phenomenon known as *stereotype threat*. Psychologists have defined stereotype threat as “a situation in which a member of a group fears that her or his performance will validate an existing negative performance stereotype.”<sup>62</sup> According to researchers Loriann Roberson and Carol T. Kulik, it is “the fear of being judged and treated according to a negative stereotype about members of your group.”<sup>63</sup>

Stereotype threat has a demonstrably negative impact on performance of many activities. Roberson and Kulik write, “When stereotype threat is present, performance declines,” as it often has the effect of preventing individuals from being able to perform to his or her true potential due to psychological discouragement.<sup>64</sup> It has been observed that if participants are led to believe that members of their group (whether it be race, class, gender, etc.) typically perform at a certain ability level at a given task, they themselves may confirm that stereotype by internalizing expectations and thus performing at the socially expected level. For example, participants who are told that members of their group typically perform well at a particular task will have more confidence in their skills and achieve better results. On the other hand, participants who are told that members of their group perform poorly may adopt a defeatist attitude towards their own abilities and thus achieve inferior results. Roberson and Kulik have also found that this phenomenon can even be observed medically, as participants in studies being told they perform poorly at tasks may display physiological symptoms of

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62 Rydell *et al*, “Stereotype Threat Prevents Perceptual Learning,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science of the United States of America* 107 no. 32 (2010)

63 Roberson, Loriann and Carol T. Kulik, “Stereotype Threat at Work.” *Academy of Management Perspectives* 21 no. 2 (2007): 24-40.

64 Steele *et al*, “Contending with Group Image: The Psychology of Stereotype and Social Identity Threat.” *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 34 (2002)

anxiety such as increased blood pressure when attempting to perform the task.<sup>65</sup>

Studies show that not only is stereotype threat pervasive in society, it is critically important to address it head-on rather than passively allow it to spread. Roberson and Kulik, writing on workplace environments, found that diversity itself is insufficient in weeding out stereotypes. If left unmanaged, diversity in workplaces “is more likely to damage morale, increase turnover, and cause significant communication problems and conflict within the organization” unless the ingrained stereotypes are addressed directly.<sup>66</sup> Diverse groups being in contact with each other does not naturally eliminate baseless stereotypes so long as “an organizational context contains the conditions that create stereotype threat.”<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, Roberson and Kulik found that, “even if an organization were successful in hiring only non-prejudiced managers and eliminating stereotypes from its formal decision making, stereotypes would still exist in broader society.”<sup>68</sup>

If stereotype threat is a pernicious negative social force in the workplace, it may also be at work among those trying to learn to swim. There is an unfounded and pervasive stereotype that African Americans are naturally inferior at swimming compared to other groups. African Americans may internalize this stereotype, even if they logically know it to be untrue. According to Steele *et al*, stereotype threat is most acute for “people whose social identities have been traditionally devalued in the setting and larger society.”<sup>69</sup> Because of this African Americans may be inordinately affected by stereotype threat. As a result they may become unconsciously dispirited and not make the effort to learn to swim or not work as hard while learning to swim. Guided by the unconscious belief that they will never attain an aptitude for swimming no matter how hard they try, some African Americans may help

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65 Blascovich *et al*, “African Americans and Blood Pressure: The Role of Stereotype Threat,” *Psychological Science* 12 no. 3 (2001)

66 Roberson (2007)

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid.

69 Steele, Claude M., Steven J. Spencer and Joshua Aronson, “Contending with Group Image: The Psychology of Stereotype and Social Identity Threat.” *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 34 (2002): 379-440.

confirm the stereotype that is negatively affecting their efforts.

How, then, can stereotype threat be addressed directly in a swimming context? Stereotype threat may impact certain group's abilities to learn to swim if they are stereotyped as being innately poor at swimming. There is evidence that stereotype threat functions along racial lines. Studies have demonstrated that stereotypes are often harbored unconsciously even from early ages. These studies also show that certain stigmatized groups such as African Americans and Latinos are at all ages more likely to be aware of broadly held stereotypes than people from less stigmatized groups.<sup>70</sup> The result is that these stigmatized groups are more likely to internalize negative stereotypes about them and face a higher risk of stereotype threat and its negative implications. A 2003 study also demonstrated how stereotype threat "partially mediated race difference in cognitive ability test scores."<sup>71</sup> Roberson and Kulik argue that the problem of stereotype threat is not confined to such tests, but also presents itself in "everyday, routine situations."<sup>72</sup> If this is so, then stereotype threat can certainly affect learning an activity as novel and foreign to an individual as swimming might be. It may exacerbate natural anxieties for those who have internalized such stereotypes.

In order to eliminate stereotype threat among African American swimmers, it is necessary to help overcome the stereotype itself by giving tangible proof that many African Americans have successfully learned to swim and are now accomplished swimmers. This can be attained by a campaign focusing on past and present professional African American swimmers that can serve as role models for the community. Showing African Americans that there are skillful swimmers of the same race (and perhaps gender also) will positively affect their desire to learn how to swim. Furthermore, swimming instructors and community leaders and members should be made aware of stereotype threat and

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70 McKown and Weinstein, "The Development and Consequences of Stereotype Consciousness in Middle Childhood," *Child Development* 74 no. 2 (2003)

71 McKay *et al*, "The Effects of Demographic Variables and Stereotype Threat on Black/White Differences In Cognitive Ability Test Performance," *Journal of Business and Psychology* 18 no. 1 (2003)

72 Roberson and Kulik, "Stereotype Threat at Work,"

instructed to tackle it head-on through positive encouragement and open communication with swimming learners. Developing positive attitudes towards swimming and furthering communication may be brought about by promoting a general understanding and awareness of the African American cultural history of swimming. Stereotype threat will only serve in making African Americans less likely to learn how to swim and exacerbate existing drowning rates. Directly addressing stereotype threat through the measures listed above (as well as others) will assist in motivating African Americans to learn how to swim, promoting healthy lifestyles and exercise, and, ultimately, saving lives.

## Religious Influences in the African American Community

Organized religion plays a significant part in the African American community. According to the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, conducted in 2007 by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life, Black Americans "are markedly more religious on a variety of measures than the U.S. population as a whole." It cited that 87 percent of Blacks (vs. 83 percent of all Americans) are affiliated with a religion. It also found that 79 percent of Blacks (vs. 56 percent overall) say that religion is "very important in their life."<sup>73</sup>

Religion, while likely not directly involved, may factor into likelihood of learning to swim. While there are no specific beliefs ascribed to any commonly followed religion that promotes or prohibits swimming, numerous studies show that religious commitment, especially when supported by a religious community, is an important determinant of lifestyle and moral actions.<sup>74</sup> For religiously committed people, many of their faith's teachings offer moral and practical guidance regarding how to attain, maintain, or recover physical and emotional health. In many cases, practicing a religion involves avoiding deviance – in moral terms, this may be construed as committing certain avowed sins.<sup>75</sup> As a result, religion may affect well-being through the promotion of a personal lifestyle that avoids certain detrimental activities and favors beneficial ones that are good for health.<sup>76</sup>

We also suspect that there may be a tenuous possibility of certain religious "fatalistic views" on life held within the African American community that could affect the likelihood of swimming. Under the theory of predestination, an individual's future is entirely determined by the plan of God, so that one's day of death is already set and inevitable.<sup>77</sup> These views could lead certain individuals or families

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73 *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*, February (2008) presented to the Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life page 41.

74 Levin, J.S. *God, faith, and health: Exploring the spirituality-healing connection*. (2001) New York: John Wiley & Sons.

75 Lyman, S. M. *The seven deadly sins: Society and evil*. (1978) New York: St. Martin's Press

76 Ellison, C. G. 1991. "Religious involvement and subjective well-being." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 32: 80-99).

77 George Park Fisher. *History of Christian Doctrine*. (1896) T&T Clark. p. 165.

from avoiding situations and locations they believe are dangerous or more likely to have a fatal occurrence. Many anecdotes from African Americans revealed to us the fear they have of going to hospitals or doctors for check-ups on health because if one is predetermined to die from a certain disease or sickness, going to get checked for it would do nothing to change an inevitable event in the future. A fear of dealing with dangers head-on combine with views of predestination to create a culture of passivity. It is well known that African American women are disproportionately affected by breast cancer, as they are less likely to be diagnosed with smaller tumors (less than 2 cm) and more likely to be diagnosed with larger tumors (greater than 5cm).<sup>78</sup> In part this may be explained by the reluctance of African American women to get checked early for symptoms of breast cancer.

If one systemic disparity can be affected by personal fears mixed with religious views, then possibly the swimming disparity may be similarly affected. If so, African Americans may avoid pools and water altogether due to their inability to swim, despite the need for those who don't know how to swim to actually go to pools and other safe water environments to learn a life-saving skill. It is our goal to utilize religion as a force for positive action and a promising medium for outreach and reinforcement of goals. To combat this swimming disparity, the religious community must be active in spreading the message of a necessary change in culture that places learning to swim as a high priority for those who have not learned.

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<sup>78</sup> “Cancer Facts and Figures for African Americans 2013-2014.” Atlanta, GA: *American Cancer Society*, 2013.

### **Part 3: The Future of a Rhode Island Learn-to-Swim Program**

“There is a cure for drowning: it’s swim lessons.” - Cullen Jones<sup>79</sup>

The importance of learning how to swim cannot be understated. As Cullen Jones, the gold medal Olympian has stated, there is no better preventative measure to take against drowning than giving individuals proper swimming lessons. But teaching swimming does more than that; it empowers individuals to be able to master a new environment and it creates self confidence. Swimming is an important part of many vacations and is a great way to cool off in summer and warm locations. Furthermore, swimming is excellent exercise and is a low-impact way of working out every major muscle group. It is our goal to enable people to experience water environments in a safe and fun way.

Swim Empowerment will create a Rhode Island Swimming Program with the objective of teaching 3,000 people how to swim every year for the next 10 years. This will total 30,000 new swimmers. To achieve such ambitions, we must carefully develop all aspects of this program, which will include the securing of swimming facilities, creating a full-scale outreach and recruiting campaign to enlist support and attendees in the African American community, and having a sophisticated training program for the swim coaches and trainers that promote cultural sensitivity and flexibility for the needs of various individuals learning to swim.

Our lessons will be carefully adapted from the high caliber lesson plans of the YMCA and Red Cross who have had decades of experience in teaching people to swim, and have carefully prepared documents detailing every aspect of training people properly. The YMCA in particular has been kind enough to provide a copy of their training materials which has a simple but thorough system of assigning skill levels to participants and categorizing the discrete skills needed to be learned in order to swim different strokes and to be competent at maneuvering in water.

<sup>79</sup> Griffin, Tamerra, “Making a Splash with Cullen Jones” [Interview]: June 26, 2013 for *Ebony* / Entertainment & Culture - <http://www.ebony.com/entertainment-culture/making-a-splash-with-cullen-jones-interview-747#axzz2dSr8oW8k>

In order to make these lessons a possibility for the people of Rhode Island, we need to secure the necessary resources, which means getting access to pools and arranging transportation for those who are distant from the pools and do not have the means or private transportation to get to the pools. This entails developing relationships with many pool owners and managers around Rhode Island to have them open their doors for our program several hours a week. They need to be prepared for the large influx of novice swimmers coming to their facilities. Our program will also be working to arrange transportation to and from the facilities for those participants who are too far to walk and do not have rides to the pools. We will be conferring with other local programs such as “Wheels to Water,” a Worcester-based initiative to provide transportation to swimming lessons.

In preparation for our swim lessons, we will be instituting a training program in the months prior to the summer of 2014 in order to secure certified swim instructors and lifeguards. We will be scouting for Black swimmers who are motivated to get the job-training that will qualify them not only for being paid employees of Swim Empowerment, but also give them the opportunity for further employment outside of our program in future years. Our trained lifeguards will increase the number of professionals at a pool during any given time ensuring the safety of our students and putting to ease the pool facility managers.

Swim Empowerment will function by regularly submitting itself to internal reviews to measure its efficacy in the life-guard and instructor training phase and the general learn-to-swim phase. Using his background in mathematics and statistical analysis, Dylan Molho, Project Director of Swim Empowerment, will perform evaluations of the programs' outcomes. This will include a weekly internal report to judge the successes and any shortcomings of the recruitment project and the larger learn-to-swim program, as well as a monthly report to Swim empowerment leadership, and a quarterly report to our collaborators, government officials, and funders.

Swim Empowerment is investigating large-scale possibilities for bringing new swimming

facilities to Providence. After a formal touring of Brown University's new Olympic-sized-plus swim facility, we have been petitioning local and state officials to create such a major resource for the use of the general public, reversing a trend in Providence of cutting funding and support to public pool facilities and denying access to those who cannot afford a private membership to clubs or pools. Furthermore, we have been doing feasibility studies and starting discussions with architects and construction companies to learn more about this possibility. As an alternative to a new pool, Swim Empowerment has also looked into whether or not a major water park company would be interested in building a commercial water park in Rhode Island, and if they would be amenable to opening their pools to our program a set number of hours every week.

Finally, Ray Rickman, Swim Empowerment President, will engage in a number of ongoing outreach efforts to connect with the the Black community in six towns and cities to increase interest and funding for our program. This will include grassroots-oriented activities including speaking at local churches and schools which African Americans attend, as well as hosting a major swimming competition that will encourage participation in swimming throughout the state. In September 2014, we will unveil a “swim team” for people 55 years or older to be lead by civic leader Charles Newton.

## The Physical Benefits of Swimming

Swimming is the second most popular exercise activity in the United States, with approximately 360 million annual visits to recreational water venues.<sup>80</sup> This comes as no surprise since swimming is not only a life-saving skill but also an enjoyable leisure activity and an excellent source of physical fitness. However, since approximately 70 percent of African Americans cannot swim there is unequal access to this excellent form of physical activity. Furthermore, there are clear disparities in health and wellness between groups with different socioeconomic, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and education levels.<sup>81</sup> It is well documented that those in the African American community suffer striking health and wellness disparities compared to other groups. Diseases such as diabetes, obesity, stroke, heart disease, and certain cancers occur more frequently among African Americans.<sup>82</sup> Because of this problem it is imperative to encourage healthy lifestyles and physical activities in this community. Since swimming is a physical activity that can lead to a healthier lifestyle and many African Americans cannot swim, it is necessary to overcome these impediments that prevent African Americans from having this popular opportunity for physical fitness.

There is an overwhelming consensus in the medical community that swimming regularly is effective aerobic exercise that can dramatically increase fitness, strength, and aid in weight loss efforts.<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, swimming is an ideal activity for those for whom physical activity may normally be difficult or uncomfortable. Swimming is a low-impact activity and gentler on the joints than running or walking. Since the body is buoyant in water it means that there is less weight to bear while swimming than compared to exercising on land. When immersed to the waist the body bears just 50 percent of its weight, being immersed to the chest reduces that amount to around 25 to 35 percent,

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80 Weil, Richard. "Swimming." *MedicineNet.com*. Accessed September 20, 2013.

81 "Minority Health, What Are Health Disparities?" *National Institutes of Health*. Accessed September 20, 2013.

82 "Examples of Health Disparities." *Center to Reduce Cancer Health Disparities*. Accessed September 20, 2013. [crchd.cancer.gov/about/examples.html](http://crchd.cancer.gov/about/examples.html)

83 Cooper, Kenneth H. *Aerobics (revised, reissue ed.)*. New York: Bantam Books, 1983

and submerged all the way to the neck the body only bears 90 percent of its own weight.<sup>84</sup> Those suffering from obesity, arthritis, or have other difficulties exercising may find swimming a suitable alternative for fitness.

Scientists have determined that aerobic exercises such as swimming have multiple long-term and short-term positive health outcomes. Some of these health problems are those that disproportionately affect African Americans. Such benefits include strengthening the muscles involved in breathing, strengthening the heart and making it more efficient, improving circulation and reducing blood pressure, increasing the number of red blood cells and facilitating oxygen transport, and reducing risk of diabetes. As a result, aerobic exercise can reduce the risk of death due to cardiovascular problems.<sup>85</sup>

Aerobic exercise can even positively affect mental health by reducing stress and lowering the incidence of depression. Regular exercise and physical activity leads to the body releasing endorphins, which are natural painkillers that stimulate a general sense of well-being.<sup>86</sup> The physical benefits of swimming include potential increases in cardiovascular, pulmonary, neurological, and psychological health. This is on top of the social health that swimming fosters by bringing people together for a communal activity. There are many potential social benefits from physical activity such as swimming in urban neighborhoods where there are often high crime rates and fewer opportunities for positive social interactions.

Swimming is a regular weight-loss activity enjoyed by many. Regular swimmers may have less fatigue and be more alert. Consistent swimming can even ward off viral illnesses – such as cold and flu – by strengthening the immune system. In the long term, aerobic and cardiovascular exercises reduce health risks for conditions such as obesity, heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, stroke and

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84 Franco, Michael. "10 Health Benefits of Swimming." *Discovery*. Accessed September 20, 2013.  
<http://health.howstuffworks.com/wellness/aging/retirement/10-health-benefits-of-swimming.htm>

85 Mersy, DJ. "Health benefits of aerobic exercise." *Postgraduate Medicine* 90 no. 1 (1991):103-7, 110-2.

86 Mayo Clinic Staff. "Aerobic exercise: Top 10 reasons to get physical." *Mayoclinic.com*. Accessed September 20, 2013.  
<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/aerobic-exercise/EP00002>

certain types of cancer. It can also help manage chronic conditions, promote relaxation, slow the aging process, maintain cognitive skills, and help people live longer.<sup>87</sup> Since many of these chronic illnesses disproportionately affect the African American community, it is crucial to encourage physical activity within this group. Swim Empowerment works to not only promote swimming to prevent drowning, but also as a wellness effort to improve the lives of many African Americans.

Swimming is a healthy activity that promotes physical fitness and overall mental and physical wellness. It is also a lifelong skill and activity for those who enjoy it. Since there is so little impact in swimming, many people of all ages and body-types can enjoy its benefits. The United States Masters Swimming website for age categories of their swim competitions contains a 100 to 104-year-old age group.<sup>88</sup> Swimming at all ages sets a good example and older swimmers can be role models for younger swimmers. Older swimmers demonstrate that nobody is too old or physically unfit to swim and that it can have positive benefits to physical and mental health for people of all ages. It is especially important to instill the idea of physical fitness in children, as that is not only a time in which they learn important lifelong habits, but also a crucial period of their physiological development. A 2001 study found that young swimmers were found to be "biologically older" than their peers, particularly when instructed by well-trained swimming teachers.<sup>89</sup> Those without the benefit of physical activities such as swimming will not have the opportunity to physically develop to their full potential, something that may affect their health throughout their life.

Swim Empowerment will work towards promoting swimming so that children can learn from adults and families and community members can join together in taking positive actions for their health. A study of an Australian aboriginal community found that adding public swimming pools to

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87 Mayo Clinic Staff (2013)

88 Weil, Richard. "Swimming." *MedicineNet.com*. Accessed September 20, 2013. <http://www.medicinenet.com/swimming/article.htm>

89 Wawrzyniak, Grzegorz. "Biological Age in Children who Practise Swimming." *Anthropologischer Anzeiger* 59 no. 2 (2001): 149-156.

typically underserved neighborhoods resulted in the reduction of illnesses and “could result in long term benefits through reduction in chronic disease burden and improved education and social outcomes.”<sup>90</sup> Locals reported that “children looked happier and healthier and were learning to swim.” They also remarked that having a public pool in the area “keeps kids out of mischief,” school attendance improved, and the local police commented that they had noted a “marked decline in petty crime.”<sup>91</sup> The writers of this paper argue that along with “better housing, sanitation, nutrition, education, and access to health care,” the building and maintaining of swimming pools should be considered as an important investment in the social and physical health of communities. “The costs involved will be a small price to pay for the reduction in severe chronic disease and improved health, educational, and social outcomes” in certain “seriously disadvantaged” segments of society. They conclude that “the pools have resulted in significant health and social gains” and are well worth public investment.<sup>92</sup> This is a parallel situation to the one Swim Empowerment seeks to address in Rhode Island’s African American community.

Swimming can be a powerful tool in combating the discrepancies in health and wellness between African Americans and others. By remaining aware of the persistent health discrepancies and the myriad cultural and economic barriers preventing many African Americans from learning how to swim, Swim Empowerment promotes physical activity and works towards improving health for all. Swimming is not only a life-saving skill but also an important physical fitness activity for diverse groups of people. African Americans suffer from a number of illnesses at disproportionate rates, some of which may be mitigated or even prevented by exercises such as swimming. Learning to swim will provide an outlet for physical fitness, help close the discrepancies in health and wellness between African Americans and others, and create a culture of physical fitness for a new generation.

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90 Lehmann, Deborah; et. al “Benefits of Swimming Pools in Two Remote Aboriginal Communities in Western Australia: Intervention Study.” *British Medical Journal* 327 no. 7412 (2003): 415-419.

91 *Ibid*, 417

92 *Ibid*, 418

## Swimming Lessons

In implementing our Rhode Island Learn-to-Swim program, Swim Empowerment will be utilizing the expertise of the YMCA and the Red Cross in aquatics and water-safety. With of their decades of experience in teaching people how to swim, these organizations have developed standardized approaches to this problem and have written extensively on the subject. The YMCA in particular has a comprehensive collection of documents and videos detailing their own training program, and it is these resources that we take as a foundation for our own program that will be adapted to meet the particular needs of the African American community. Our lessons will not only provide the basics of swimming competency, but will allow for personal growth towards higher levels of swimming proficiency, including pushing those who are motivated to participate in competitive swimming, diving, or even synchronized swimming.

In order for any training program to be successful, having great instructors is a crucial ingredient that will either allow for an effective and fun program for the participants, or lead to many people getting frustrated, failing to learn skills, and dropping out of the program. Good instructors create an environment in which participants can grow by both providing models for students and challenging them to think. As the instructor shows interest and concern, participants gain self-assurance. First impressions are always important, especially when attempting to alleviate any fears incoming participants may be having about swimming. We will cover the ways an instructor can make students comfortable from the very beginning and can conduct himself or herself professionally with students and staff.

Instructors need to understand the participants' development over time, especially when using a student-centered approach. Class activities need to be developmentally appropriate and follow the principles of how children and adults learn best. This requires a close monitoring of the students in

order for the instructors to accommodate their needs. Group-taught lessons present a unique difficulty of attempting to meet the learning speeds of many different individuals so students will be placed in groups according to their abilities. Instructors will work hard to match the developmental characteristics of participants at different levels by using lesson plans and activities that are appropriate for the students. Appropriate lessons will neither redundantly teach students what they already know, nor will the lessons attempt to prematurely teach skills that are above the capabilities of the student.

A proper understanding of how to teach a complex physical activity like swimming requires some knowledge of the mechanics involved. For both teachers and for students, it is easier to learn when one has a framework from which to think about movement in the water. The YMCA uses a model based on Rudolf Laban's movement description, in which a person's movement is divided into four areas: *What* the body is doing, *where* or in what spaces the body is moving, how much *effort* or force the body is exerting during the movement, and what *timing* occurs between the parts of the body.<sup>93</sup> The Laban movement framework acts as a starting point for developing skill themes within lessons and allows for sequences of questions that the instructor can use to guide students in their learning. This is followed by techniques for observing students and giving them clear feedback.

To increase beginning swimmers' confidence and to allow them to sustain a swimming effort before they have mastered breathing techniques, we will provide them with flotation belts, kickboards, or other instructional flotation devices. These aids will help students kick and swim lengths of the pool. When students have adequate time to practice and to develop strength, endurance, and self-confidence, they can learn new skills faster and more easily. The use of flotation devices gives students the opportunity to practice and progress at their own pace. Using these devices also makes it possible for instructors to work with more than one student at a time, maximizing the amount of time students spend in the water.

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93 Logsdon, B.J., & Barrett, K.R. "Movement-The content of physical education." in B.J. Logsdon, et al. (Eds.) *Teaching physical education to children*. Philadelphia: Lea & Febiger. (1984)

Lessons will give step-by-step instructions for students to master swimming strokes, which include the front crawl, the back crawl, the breaststroke, the butterfly stroke, and the sidestroke. Our swimming teachers will know the progression of skills of different difficulties that should be used in teaching each stroke, as well as the normal progression of movements for participants to learn for strokes. We believe it will be beneficial to impart to our instructors and students some basic physics principles that apply to stroke development, with sample lessons that explain these principles in an understandable fashion.

Classes will have sessions with daily lesson plans, which will be led by organizational procedures and practice patterns that allow class activities to proceed smoothly and effectively. Class safety is always considered a priority, so we will consider how instructional flotation devices and games can enhance skill teaching for children. We also accept the possibility that children may exhibit problematic behaviors, which may need direct care and intervention, and may require the involvement of the child's parent in the instruction.

Because this is an inclusive program that seeks to teach people of all ages, we will also tailor lesson plans for adults. These lessons require an understanding of some of the specific psychological and developmental characteristics of adults that could affect their learning. Adults may come to class feeling anxious or apprehensive, whether this is due to embarrassment at not having learned to swim sooner or potentially from past traumatic experiences in the water. They also may be concerned about how they look in a bathing suit, their ability to perform, or disabilities caused by aging. Our instructors will be personally equipped to dealing with any anxieties by setting realistic goals, conducting open dialogues, and providing respectable feedback to adults. A skill progression suitable for an older student group can be used along with adjustments made for some common physical limitations. Furthermore, the use of equipment and safety precautions is as important to adults as it is to children. Since senior adults have particular needs and concerns, our instructors will have a detailed

understanding of the physical and mental changes likely to occur in an older population. Using this knowledge we will provide ideas for creating classes to meet older adults' capabilities and interests.

By instituting our Learn-to-Swim program in Rhode Island, Swim Empowerment seeks not only to teach swimming fundamentals to those individuals that are in need of the skill set, but also to develop and engage the whole person physically and mentally. This means building life skills in children by inculcating self-reliance, practical skills, and good values, as well as promoting leadership development through volunteerism. We will provide students with accurate health and fitness information and methods of motivation and goal setting. We will foster ideas with our trained instructors on how to create a comfortable class environment where students feel free to explore. Lastly, participants of our program will be encouraged to progress from their role as a student to deeper levels of involvement in the program, which will include moving towards becoming instructors themselves or simply supporting the outreach efforts of our program.

## Pool Access and Transportation

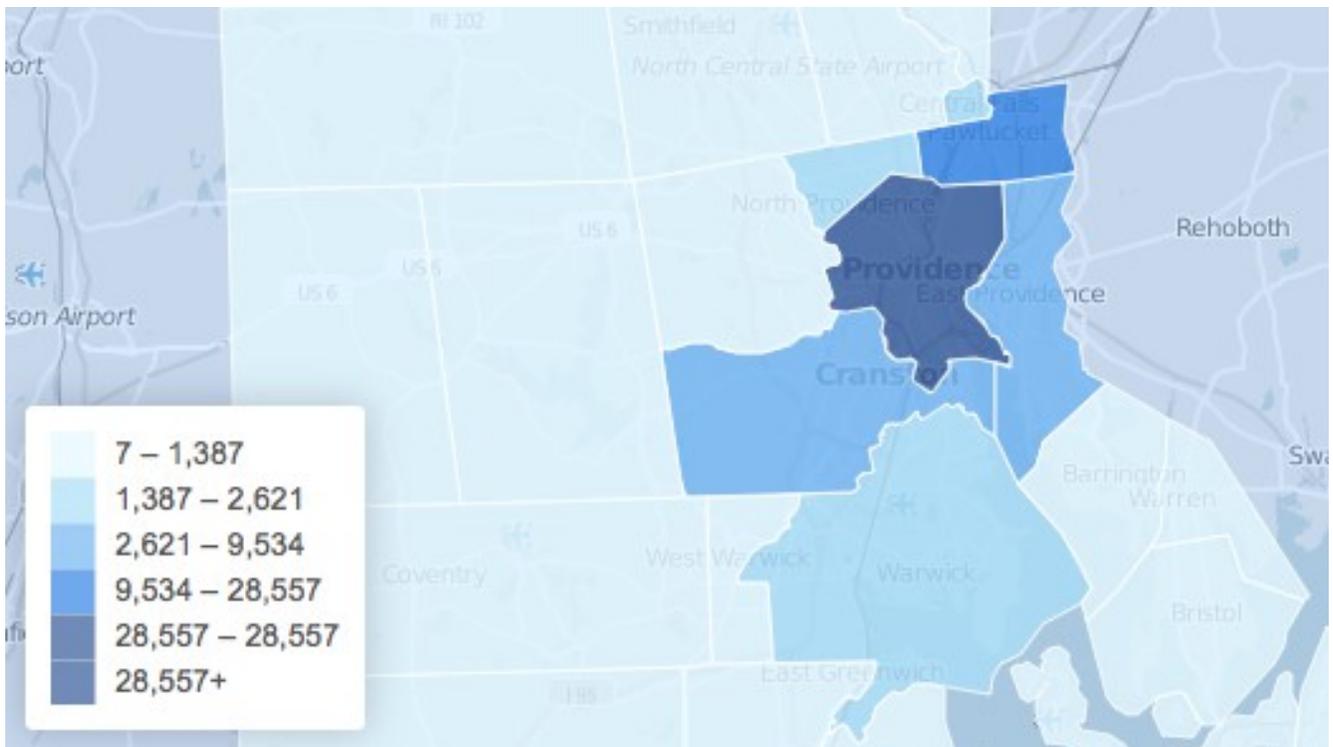
The philosophy of our program is to provide free swimming lessons to those in need of them while trying to remove all barriers that may prevent access to these lessons. One of the most basic needs that must be satisfied is access and transportation to and from pools and swimming facilities. In order to secure pools for our upcoming swim program, Swim Empowerment has been and will continue to work hard in developing relationships with owners and managers of local pools to persuade them to open their facilities to our program. By conferring with many different institutions we are building a network of pools that will allow for the large-scale programming we are seeking to create around the state.

Swim Empowerment began this mission by making an electronic map of all pools and swimming areas (including lakes and beaches) in Rhode Island. This map not only served as a tool for delineating where the need for pools was greatest and where we should attempt to gain access, but this map will also be made into a freely accessible tool online for all Rhode Islanders to use. Once a searchable template is programmed into the map, a user can input their location and a certain limit on distance, and the map will show all the pools within that limit around their location. This will allow Rhode Islanders to connect with local pools and swimming locations. This map can be modified to give information on whether the pools are public or private, or whether they are a part of the Swim Empowerment program or not.

The Providence Recreation Center pools at first seemed like the perfect locations to host our program and to use for teaching. However, with the exception of the Davey Lopes pool, all pools have had their deep ends filled in, making them unsuitable for lessons for adults. Furthermost, the Davey Lopes pool was closed in the summer of 2013 and is likely being scheduled for a similar cement job. In

addition, all of the public pools have been subject to a host of restrictive rules including certain height requirements for children to go in the pools and forcing children to have one of their parents attend with them. Combined with the fact that the pools have had consistently less operating hours from years past, these policies have all served to restrict access to the pools.

While such funding cutbacks are on par with the historical precedent we have explored in earlier sections, it seems out of order that such policies would be taken today when they clearly serve to disadvantage poor and minority populations who often cannot afford memberships to private pools and clubs, or who are too locationally removed from other pools to use them. Providence has the greatest proportion of minority communities in Rhode Island, as one can see from a infographic created by The Providence Plan, a site dedicated to collecting information on Rhode Island. According to the 2010 census, 5.7% of the total Rhode Island population was Black. In that same year, however, Black residents accounted for 16.0% of the Providence population, an increase in 1.5% from the 2010 census.



Providence has the greatest need for public resources to match the needs of its minority populations, and yet public programs all around the board are being cut. In relation to our Learn to Swim Program, this unfortunate set of circumstances will require a greater use of private facilities within the city to meet our program's needs. We will work with hotels and other private clubs that own pools to have them open their doors for our students. Two major allies and sources of pools will be Brown University and the YMCA in Providence and Rhode Island.

Just as important to our gaining access to pools will be the transportation we secure for our participants who cannot travel to the pools. We take inspiration from the Wheels to Water program that has been a part of the City of Worcester's summer programming. They very successfully secured funding to arrange a bus system to and from swimming pools and other facilities, and we hope to take this system as our model. We will be consulting with the Wheels to Water program as we organize our program, with the possibility of setting up an equivalent system on a state-wide level using public funding for buses and bus drivers.

## Swim Empowerment Lifeguard and Swim Instructor Training Program

Before the institution of our learn-to-swim program, we will be using the Red Cross and YMCA standards in order to train and certify approximately 100 African American swimmers as life guards and swim instructors. This will act to place African Americans more firmly within a culture of swimming and will serve as job training for the new swim instructors and life-guards. According to the research of Samuel L. Myers, Jr. and Ana Cuesta, both from the University of Minnesota, the swimming and drowning disparities of the African American community can be correlated to an equally pronounced disparity in the rate of Black life guards, swim instructors, and swimming athletes or competitors. In their study the authors make a number of claims about how the increase of African Americans in the swimming profession could work to reverse a culture of swimming non-participation within the community as a whole. They also note, “In fact, the group or aggregate outcome may well be the result of unintended discouragement that results in blocked pathways toward success”<sup>94</sup> (e.g., subjects wanting to learn how to swim so that they can compete at elite levels, gaining scholarships, obtaining employment as lifeguards, and winning races.) Understanding this, Swim Empowerment will work on specifically raising the number of certified African American life guards in order to remove any barriers that may be perceived in the community. Furthermore, the individuals who graduate our swimming program will be eligible to serve in a number of different professions that all require swimming proficiency, including police officers, fire fighters, and emergency responders.

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94 Myers, Samuel L. and Cuesta, Ana “Causes and Consequences of Racial Disparities In Swimming,” (2012) paper prepared for presentation at the APPAM Fall Research Conference, “Policy Analysis and Public Management in an Age of Scarcity: The Challenges of Assessing Effectiveness,”

## Internal Regulation and Adaptation

Swim Empowerment will function by regularly conducting internal reviews to measure its efficacy in the life-guard and instructor training phase and the general learn-to-swim phase. Based on his background in mathematics and statistical analysis Dylan Molho will perform evaluations of the programs' outcomes. This will include a weekly internal report to judge the successes and any shortcomings of the recruitment project and the larger learn-to-swim program, as well as a monthly report to Swim empowerment leadership, and a quarterly report to our collaborators, government officials, and funders.

This analysis will occur through many distinct channels. One major component of our swim program will be a larger network of volunteers who serve as mentors to the individual swimming students. The mentors will act as an outside source for participants to confer with and communicate their potential difficulties or problems. This will yield further information on our program including participant testimonials on the efficacy of teachers, the experience of the students, and any additional barriers that created difficulty for the participants including practical problems like securing proper transportation to facilities. The mentors will relay this information to our Coordinator and Director in order for quick changes to occur, allowing for a more organic system of adaptations to match the needs of the participants.

In order to gauge the levels of swimming ability of our participants, we will require introductory surveys, as well as teacher evaluations of participants, which will use standardized Red Cross levels of swimming ability in order to make accurate judgments about the swimming proficiency of incoming students. In regular intervals the participants will receive individual report cards to update them and record their progress. Lastly, yearly studies on program successes will include a log of completion rates and other important parameters which will guide our implementation in subsequent years.

## Outreach Campaigns and Olympic-Sized Prospects

A program of this magnitude will require serious support from thousands of individuals. The attainment of our goals will only occur through the help of many others working hard to make this project a reality. We need coalition of passionate and resourceful agents of social change. These coalition members will represent the education and medical communities, local aquatic professionals, and, perhaps most important, involved individuals from the African American community.

Education and medical community representatives are critical to this initiative as they serve as providers of human resources, information and funding, as well as local political power. The education and medical community representatives have access to impassioned volunteers in the form of students (secondary as well as post-secondary), concerned parents, and community action groups. These partners will form a coalition whose members will assist with Swim Empowerment's expansion. They will provide research skills critical to securing program financing as well as water safety education and outreach through local public school programs. Local aquatic professionals include pool managers and swim coaches who can secure facilities, instructors, and mentors. These individuals may represent public as well as for-profit organizations that deliver aquatic programming. Such groups have vested interests in the success of a program like ours, as they are in the business of swimming. A growing swimming population is always a good thing for this group. From the African American community we need neighborhood spokespersons, and parents who overcame their fear of water and enrolled their children in swimming lessons. These individuals provide program relevance and connectivity via their ability to relate to the at-risk community and gain entry and trust.

Through this network we will establish a developmentally and culturally appropriate lesson series that focuses on water safety first. We will inform the community about our program needs and results in an integrated communications campaign incorporating mediums ranging from personal

contact to mass media (including social media) that is driven by research and results. As with any communications campaign, the initial focus is directed toward an internal audience and will educate the coalition with national studies regarding factors limiting swim involvement within at-risk populations. The campaign will target external parties in an effort to secure volunteers, participants, and overall civic engagement.

Personal contact is the primary method of communication to be used in recruiting program participants and volunteers. Relying only on brochures or fliers will fail to effectively reach people, so it is important that the African American community representatives serving on the program coalition are willing to share their story in small as well as large groups. Likewise, coalition members should be strategically recruited via personal contact as opposed to mass messaging in order to confirm the prospect's contribution and commitment to the program. For example, numerous participants could be recruited from targeted efforts using church members.

Mass media such as print and television will be pursued when newsworthy events occur such as when the program is launched, research results are released, or when other novel activities occur. Our program website will serve as a hub for valuable resources for the media as well as the community at large. Swim Empowerment's website will contain a program overview and updates, photos, and research specific to the local program as well as links to national studies, aquatic sources such as USA Swimming, and coalition member information. Further use of social media will be used to connect people and broadcast important information. Lastly, we will build alliances with community partners and stakeholders. Local aquatic professionals from the program coalition can work with fellow aquatics facility managers to expand the program to additional sites during underutilized periods. This may include sites such as YMCAs, community recreation centers, for-profit health clubs, public school pools, and apartment complexes. Additionally, alliances will be sought with community partners who can assist with reducing, if not eliminating, economic and access barriers such as membership fees,

equipment, and transportation.

Outside of our outreach efforts, Swim Empowerment has a number of plans to affect the Rhode Island swimming community in substantial ways. After receiving a tour of the Brown University pool at the Nelson Fitness Center, we were thoroughly impressed with the size and quality of the new pool facilities located there. After much dialogue with local public officials, Swim Empowerment has begun researching the feasibility of having a new Olympic-sized pool built in Providence to be freely used by all Rhode Islanders. While this would take a major investment for the city, according to Chapter 16 section 7-41.1 and 16-7-39 of Rhode Island State Law, a large proportion of the fees for a construction project built on school property must be paid by the State budget. Though there are many more aspects of this proposal to work out, we are excited about what we have learned so far. Alternatively, we have also been identifying Water Parks and the construction companies that make them to see if there may be interest from such organizations in creating a large water park in Rhode Island. Such a facility would have a number of pools that could be used by our program, and would bring in tourism from out of state.

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