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ON SULTRY SUMMER DAYS,
FROZEN DRINKS CAN BRING

THE BIG CHILL





Even babies can learn water survival skills. Christian (below) is now a confident swimmer thanks to Jeffrey Powers and Float Hope.

PHILANTHROPY

Immersive Experience

THE LOCAL NONPROFIT FLOAT HOPE GIVES CHILDREN THE GIFT OF SWIMMING



BY JEFFREY R. PICKERING

“**H**elp!” It was the end of a long Indian summer afternoon at the start of my freshman year in high school. My friend Erik had just signaled that he was ready to head to the beach after a marathon surf session that had turned our arms into spaghetti noodles. I gave him a thumbs-

up and scanned the horizon for one last wave.

“Help!”

I heard it again, this time in sync with a glance far out past the end of the jetty, where a flash of waving arms caught my attention. Someone was drowning.

I shouted for Erik to find a lifeguard and began to paddle

in the direction of the sinking swimmer. Another set of waves was rolling in, making it more difficult to maintain my line.

As I paddled over the last swell, I saw that there were two people in need of rescue, not just one. An older woman was treading water, trying desperately to keep her husband afloat. “He can’t swim,”



Swimming lessons for young children yield dividends in both safety and pure fun.



Tessa, Jeffrey Powers, and Denver are all smiles by the pool.

she shouted as I made my approach. They must have been swept out by the undertow. I was going to need all the skills I'd learned over the previous summer training as a lifeguard if any of us were going to survive.

Afraid the man would panic and grab hold of me to save himself, I kept my distance and pushed my surfboard close, telling him to grab on. After catching my breath, I swam toward shore using the leash connecting my ankle to the surfboard to tow the man and his wife. By the time we reached the impact zone and the crashing waves, the lifeguards had arrived to complete the rescue and loaded them into an ambulance. Erik threw a shaka my way and I collapsed on the shore, grateful and spent.

Many years before that late-September day, when my parents signed me up as a toddler for swimming lessons at

the local aquatic center, I am certain their main concern was preventing me from an accidental drowning, not someone else. It is a skill that has paid dividends far beyond my own personal safety. It has given me freedom. It helped build my confidence. Most of all, it allowed me to have more fun as a child and long into adulthood.

For decades, Florida has consistently held one of the highest rates of childhood drownings among all 50 states. With the abundance of pools, lakes, rivers, and coastal beaches, these statistics may seem inevitable. Drowning, however, is entirely preventable.

Float Hope is a local non-profit charitable organization working to prevent drownings by teaching children to swim. It was founded in 2017 by John's Island resident Jeffrey Powers and is led by executive director Beata Brewster.

INDIAN RIVER INSIGHTS

Last year, Float Hope served more than 350 children with programs ranging from free swimming lessons to swim competitions.

“Most of the children in our program come to us as ‘minnows,’” says Brewster. “This is our term for those who have never had swim lessons before and are experiencing the pool for the first time, despite the fact that they live in Florida.”

“Most are afraid of the water,” adds swimming coach Scott Barlow. “It’s our job to help make them comfortable, first by sitting on the steps, blowing bubbles, and splashing in the water. Soon, they begin to trust our instructors and eventually learn enough



Teenage instructor Mary offers some tips, as well as a kickboard, to Kaloni.

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Teen swimmers can serve as role models for youngsters afraid of the water.

to be able to swim one lap in the pool.”

After swimming lessons, about one-third of the children served remain involved for the long term. They participate in swimming competitions, which help them develop the strength and stamina needed to overcome strong currents in the ocean, avoiding potentially disastrous situations like the one I described from my high school days.

In addition to the gift of free swimming lessons, donations to Float Hope create opportunities for leadership development among teenagers. Last summer, 12 high school-age swimmers strengthened the Float Hope community by working as summer camp counselors. In many instances, the presence of an older role model from the community was the difference between “sink” and “swim” for younger students in need of encouragement.

Charitable contributions to Float Hope also support collaborations with other local charities like Youth Guidance, which offers a number of pre-apprenticeship programs for high school students inter-

ested in pursuing vocational-technical careers. Float Hope participants learn safety skills while being exposed to careers in and around the water.

“On top of safety skills,” says Barlow “these collaborations give teenage students an introduction to careers in the marine industry. A lot of these jobs are lucrative, and these kids would never be able to have an opportunity to gain access to jobs like these without learning how to swim.”

It takes a donation of approximately \$500 for Float Hope to teach a child who is afraid of the water to go from sitting on the steps to swimming one length of the pool unassisted. Compare that to the expense of the ambulance ride to the ER for the couple I saved, or to the excruciating emotional and financial cost of a funeral, and there is no debate. Swimming lessons are the most cost-effective way to prevent the costliest emergency.

Catastrophes aside, however, we can all agree that “the steps” are no place for a child to spend the summer. By overcoming fear of the water and learning to swim safely

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INDIAN RIVER INSIGHTS

and confidently, Float Hope's students open their world to endless opportunities for the most important ingredient of a child's summer: fun!

I spent most of my childhood wet, and I have many memories made possible by learning to swim at such a young age. Shallow end. Deep end. Penny dives. Marco Polo. Fish out of water. Diving boards, the low and the high dives. Cannonballs. Jack-knives. Front flips. Back flips. Inwards. Gainers. Water skiing. Slalom skiing. Knee boarding. Tubing. Skurfing (before wakeboarding was a thing.) Canoes. Paddleboats. Johnboats. Spinning rods. Fly rods. Cane poles. Crab traps.

Cast nets. Tickle sticks. White-water rafting. Skim boarding (long before the Mulligan's Skim Jam was created by the folks at shore lb.). Endless summer waves.

If asked, it is likely that my three children would offer a similar list. Teaching them to swim as infants and toddlers might be the smartest parenting decision I ever made. Certainly for the emergencies it prevented. However, the unexpected outcome of pure joy that comes from time spent in the water together is a priceless gift that I will treasure for the rest of my life.

With all the worthy local charitable causes, you would be hard-pressed to find one that



Instructor Robin Carroll works with Mya, Dorian, Milani, Maria, and Aura.

does not deliver a meaningful return on your charitable investment. However, if you're looking to make a big splash for a lesser-known charity that is making a life-saving impact, consider a gift to Float Hope.

Float Hope started with a drop of kindness that's had a ripple effect throughout our community. It deserves a wave of generosity. Because the steps are no place for a child to spend the summer. 🌊

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