DISCOVERING THE JOYS OF THE SEA

Eleuthera-based program 'Swim to Empower' expands, changes lives

A NEW LEASE
■ (Above) Swim to Empower participants and instructors at the beach.
File Photo

UNDA DA' SEA
■ (Left) A "Swim to Empower" participant.

REASON TO SMILE
■ "Swim to Empower" founder and executive director Brenna Hughes with a participant.
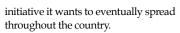*Photos obtained from swimtoempower.org*

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With a sweet-faced little boy on its cover, "We, Sea," a book of photographs and words by children in South Eleuthera, is the magic of the ocean through the eyes of kids who have recently learned to swim. Children splashing together with bright smiles or wide-eyed in goggles underwater, emerald sunshine and glassy shallow seas color the book, part of a project by Jennifer Galvin, PhD., a doctor of environmental health whose work examines the intersection of medicine, public health and marine science. But the book is also much more. With all of its young authors and photographers past participants in the Swim to Empower program, founded in Eleuthera four years ago by American student and its executive director Brenna Hughes, "We, Sea" is an exciting offshoot of a program that continues to grow and inspire.

"It's exciting," said Hughes, who is from Boston, of the free, community-based summer program that began in Deep Creek, Eleuthera in 2005. "The first summer we taught 10 [children] and last summer we taught over 120."

So far, Swim to Empower has taught 250 children and adults in five South Eleuthera settlements to swim.

In another step forward, the program expands to partner with the Bahamas Swimming Federation (BSF). The BSF has already identified six competitive swimmers with learn-to-swim backgrounds who will spend a month in Eleuthera teaching Swim to Empower participants to swim. By the time the program begins this summer, the organization hopes to get 10 swim federation instructors involved in an initiative it wants to eventually spread throughout the country.
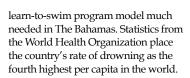
"We're going to try, after the program, to come up with a model that we can transfer to some of the other islands because the need exists on all the Family Islands," said Cathy Dillette, the BSF liaison for the program.

"It's more than a learn-to-swim program," she said. "It's much more than that."

The Swim to Empower/BSF partnership aims not only to get competitive Bahamian swimmers who may be away in school involved in a program where they can give back to the community, it also aims to make the program fully Bahamian. A self sufficient, Bahamian-run program has always been Hughes' original goal. Up until this summer, her organization had enlisted instructors through interest generated by its web site and from amongst her friends.

And although the program includes a teacher aide component where students who have learned to swim then graduate to helping to teach others to swim, the BSF partnership offers more instructors to ensure its sustainability.

"We're working with the competitive swimmers of the Bahamas Swimming Federation to try to bring them in as extra support and older support and a way to make it truly Bahamian, and an organization that's really grass roots," said Hughes. Swim to Empower, with its combination one-on-one swim lessons and environmental and marine science education sessions, brings a widely accessible, community-based learn-to-swim program model much needed in The Bahamas. Statistics from the World Health Organization place the country's rate of drowning as the fourth highest per capita in the world.

"Swimming is the second leading cause of accidental death for children around the world and kids of color drown at disproportionate rates — about three times the rate — as Caucasian kids. That has a lot of implications socially in terms of social justice and other issues facing teenagers today with respect to educational achievement and violence and crime," said Galvin, who has worked with Hughes and Swim to Empower and has also created a documentary film "Free Swim," based on her experiences. She hopes to have the film premiere internationally at the Bahamas International Film Festival in December.

Before starting what blossomed into Swim to Empower, Hughes, conducted a survey in South Eleuthera where she had once been a student at The Island School, on the number of people who could not swim and the reasons why. She found that 80 percent of those surveyed could not swim, a statistic that appeared to prove true throughout the islands.

"It's kind of like living on a cliff and being afraid of heights," said Hughes.

Passionate about water safety and the importance of learning to swim, her interest in the paradox of islanders not knowing how to swim began after an experience she had with a friend in Eleuthera who did not know how to swim. Hughes and a few friends began informally teaching children who were interested how to swim at the beach in the Deep Creek community. Swim to Empower took off from there.

People in the communities have been more than grateful for the work the organization has done.

"You would think that we're surrounded by water, most of us would be able to swim, but sad to say there's quite a number of us who really can't swim," said Donnalee Miller, a Ministry of Tourism officer in South Eleuthera who learned to swim in the program in 2007 and has been an advocate for it ever since.

"It helps a lot of the adults and of course the children."

Now Swim to Empower embraces the support it is beginning to get from local organizations, including the Bahamas Olympic Association, which has made funds from the International Olympic Committee through the Olympic solidarity program, "Sport for All," available.

"That's what's going to also make it possible for us to bring our Bahamian kids back into the program," said Dillette.

Said Hughes, who never imagined a lifelong passion for swimming and a chance experience with a friend would become the model learn-to-swim organization that is Swim to Empower: "I think it shows the power of a simple skill like swimming and also it's great because it's free, and you don't need a lot of money to teach people how to swim. You just need the ocean."