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Sunday, Jun 22, 2008

Posted on Sun, Jun. 22, 2008

## Arlington program provides swimming lessons for needy kids

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With water parks seemingly popping up everywhere, water safety has become a primary concern for parents of area youths.

USA Swimming, the sport's national governing body, recognizes this and has begun an initiative aimed at improving water skills among kids, particularly minority children.

It's called Make a Splash, and it is trying to get its feet wet in Arlington, its only North Texas site.

Through the Mid-Cities/Arlington Swimming Foundation, the program offers discounted swim lessons at the Hugh Smith Indoor Pool in east Arlington to youths 14 and under who qualify for free or reduced-price school lunches.

The first batch of participants were 30 fifth-grade girls from Thornton Elementary, only three of whom had significant knowledge of how to swim, said Sor Zitrick, a teacher's assistant at the east Arlington school.

"When I surveyed the girls and asked if they could swim, everyone raised their hands," Zitrick said. "But when I investigated further, most of them had only been in a pool but really didn't know how to swim. They had no knowledge of strokes, no real idea how to save themselves. This was something important they needed to know."

### The program

The goals of Make a Splash are to promote diversity within the sport and to help reduce youth drownings.

According to USA Swimming, drownings among African-American children are almost triple the national average.

Make a Splash was launched in Atlanta, where 55.7 percent of the population was African-American in 2006, according to the Census Bureau. By comparison, about 18.2 percent of Arlington residents were African-American in 2006, according to the North Central Texas Council of Governments.

Suzanne Dangelmaier, a coach with Mid-Cities/Arlington Swimming, was integral in bringing Make a Splash to Arlington.

"We hear on the news where a kid slips into the Trinity River and doesn't know how to save himself," she said. "For fire safety, they have to stop, drop and roll, or wear white at night, all these safety things. But for swimming, kids need to know how to save themselves if they slip in."

### Financial support

Arlington became an official Make a Splash partner this month. The next step is to raise money to subsidize the swimming lessons.

Program sponsors have contributed about \$1,000 to offer participants lessons at reduced rates, Dangelmaier said. That could be important because 54.6 percent of Arlington school district students are considered economically disadvantaged.

Dangelmaier is asking for help from a variety of organizations. USA Swimming provides promotional and marketing support only.

D&J Sports donated swimsuits, goggles and swim caps. Sharolyn Dihigo, a pediatric nurse practitioner whose son, Michael, swims for Mid-Cities/Arlington Swimming, secured a \$600 donation from the Greater Texas Chapter of the National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners.

"We deal a lot with those in low socio-economic groups, and our mission is to help those groups," Dihigo said. "It felt like it would be a great thing to support a cause that goes along with our mission."

Christina Luchega teaches third grade at Thornton, and her daughter, Kaylie, is in Make a Splash.

Luchega said she particularly appreciated the swim coaches, who taught the girls on their own time.

Kaylie said she appreciated the opportunity for athletic activity.

"I love it. It's amazing," she said. "Usually it's the boys that get to do this kind of stuff."

**Make a Splash Cost:** The Arlington Parks and Recreation Department offers 10 25-minute swimming lessons for \$56. Youths who qualify for free or reduced-price school lunches can get 50 percent or more off the regular price.

### Target age:

Elementary school children ages 6 to 13

### Information:

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