



# THE MEMPHIS STORY:

*Teaching a Community to swim*

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THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**MEMPHIS**



THE BENJAMIN L.  
HOOKS INSTITUTE  
FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

**MAKE A  
SPLASH**  
Mid-South

## Dedication

This work is dedicated to the memory of all children in the Memphis area who have needlessly died due to drowning. Specifically, we convey our great sorrow and respect to the families of Demavius Bailey and Cameron Hogg whose very young lives were cut short May 31, 2008. However, their tragic passing did not go unnoticed. Both Cameron and Demavius were the initial inspiration for the *Make a Splash Mid-South*\* “Learn to Swim” Program, and why now so many Memphis area children have developed into safer, more competent swimmers. We pay our respects to Cameron and Demavius, their families and friends, and to all individuals who have lost their lives or have become injured unintentionally due to drowning.

*\* In August 2012, Make a Splash Mid-South shortened its name to Splash Mid-South.  
[www.splashmidsouth.org](http://www.splashmidsouth.org)*

## Foreword

As the newly minted Director of the Benjamin L. Hooks Institute for Social Change at the University of Memphis, I received a call one morning in 2008 from Andy Meyers, Vice Provost of Research at the University of Memphis, asking if I had a few minutes to meet Anthony Norris. Andy stated that Anthony was starting a new program to teach minority youth to swim and that Anthony wanted to speak with me about how the Hooks Institute might assist this effort. Moments later, both Andy and Anthony were sitting in my office with Anthony providing a brief overview of an initiative by Anthony and others then underway to increase swimming proficiency rates among young African American youth. This initiative began with great urgency in response to the sadness and bewilderment in the Memphis community over the drowning of two African American youth, Cameron Hogg and Demavius Bailey.<sup>1</sup>

Anthony explained that he not only wanted to reduce unintentional drowning, but also wanted to create future opportunities for African American youth to swim on a competitive level, which would then support potential employment options, such as being a lifeguard, a swim instructor, and/or an aquatic director. Anthony then asked if the Hooks Institute could provide scholarships to children to allow them to take swimming lessons in

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<sup>1</sup> *On August 3, 2010, six African American youth, 5 boys and 1 girl, drowned trying to save each other as each fell into a sink hole in the Red River located in northwest Louisiana. Marilyn Robinson, a friend of the family, heartbreakingly remarked, "It was nothing I could do but watch them drown one by one." (See [http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/38533071/ns/us\\_news-life/t/six-teens-drown-trying-save-each-other-red-river-sinkhole/](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/38533071/ns/us_news-life/t/six-teens-drown-trying-save-each-other-red-river-sinkhole/) msnbc.com staff and news service reports). This horrific story illustrates the magnitude of the problem and the urgent need for programs like Splash Mid-South.*

this new program. I knew that the Hooks Institute could offer more. The University of Memphis has been ranked by the Carnegie Foundation as one of only 62 colleges or universities across the nation, as well as the only public university in Tennessee, as a “Community Engaged” research institution. The University, through centers like the Hooks Institute, is committed to collaborations among faculty, students, and community organizations to address problems facing our communities. Anthony wanted to create a swimming program that was not only effective, but that could also be replicated in other communities. To help achieve these goals, I proposed that the Hooks Institute fund research that would evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed swim program. Anthony readily embraced this offer and the Hooks Institute’s joined the swim initiative previously known as Make a Splash Mid-South and is now known as Splash Mid-South.

The goals of Make a Splash Mid-South dovetail with work of the Hooks Institute. The Institute’s mission of *teaching, studying, and promoting civil rights and social change* is implementing through its programming which includes funding faculty research intended to address racial, economic, health and other social injustices. In 1996, the Institute, approved by the Tennessee Board of Regents as a center at the University, was founded by the late Dr. Benjamin L. Hooks and University officials. Dr. Hooks was a strategic, intellectual activist, who searched for the “big picture” to identify political, social, and other trend variables that influence social inequities. Hooks believed that “institutional” approaches to solving problems in our communities was often required, and believed that in the twenty-first century, universities, through centers like the Hooks Institute, could play a larger role in

developing and implementing tactics to alleviate social injustices. The Make a Splash Mid-South initiative aligned perfectly with the spirit of activism envisioned by Dr. Hooks.

Lack of swimming skills unequivocally impacts life or death for African American youth. The loss of life and injury through unintentional drowning has deprived all of us of the talents and contributions these youth might have made had they lived to become adults. Evaluating the effectiveness of the Make a Splash Mid-South program, therefore, was critical to not only the program's success, but also to the future of the children and families who would be the beneficiaries of the program. Moreover, evaluating the planning and execution of the program and the participants' experiences was crucial to determining if the program was meeting its stated goals.

The research and anecdotal comments set forth in this monograph suggest that there are numerous reasons -- known or unknown -- that might account for low swim rates among African Americans. Historical barriers flowing from the Jim Crow era prohibiting African Americans access to public swimming pools have been noted by some as the root of the problem, while recent research identifies other reasons. Contemporary conditions that create low rates of swimming competency among African American youth may be influenced by, among other things, the parents' ability to swim and the parents' encouragement of their children to swim; the parents' access to financial and other resources to support swimming activities; and misconceptions in some communities that swimming is not "black" sport. The research was intended to identify possible deterrents to

participation by African Americans in swimming, and to evaluate the effectiveness of the swim instruction the Make a Splash Mid South program provided to its participants.

The Hooks Institute is extremely grateful to Carol and Richard Irwin, faculty members in the Department of Health and Sport Sciences at the University of Memphis, for their leadership in and commitment to collecting and analyzing the data on the Make a Splash Mid-South program presented in this monograph. While the Irwin's spent numerous hours collecting and summarizing data, their commitment extended far beyond their research to also the Make a Splash Mid-South partners, and the children and families who participated in the program.

There would have been no research to conduct on Make a Splash Mid-South but for the early commitment and strong leadership of Anthony Norris and Susan Helms, Director of Injury Prevention and Safe Kids Mid-South, housed at Le Bonheur Children's Hospital. Anthony and Susan played a pivotal role in organizing the various community groups, non-profit, and governmental agencies to create Make a Splash Mid-South. Susan and Anthony were fully supported by a group of dedicated individuals who made substantial contributions to this effort by giving personal and professional time and resources to build Make a Splash Mid-South into an effective program. Finally, thanks to the University of Memphis and Andy Meyers for their support of this important initiative. It reflects the University's commitment to create positive change in our local and greater communities through engaged scholarship.

The Hooks Institute, the Irwin's, and the Splash Mid-South partners hope that this monograph will encourage and assist communities throughout the nation in developing swim programs to increase swimming competency among African American youth. We believe such efforts will save lives and will help create a more positive future for our children, their families, and our communities.

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*August 28, 2012*

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## **Prologue: The Memphis Story**

Saturday, May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2008, was a beautiful, sunny day in Memphis. School was out and children all over the city were joyfully celebrating the beginning of summer and freedom. The outdoor swimming pools were open for the first day of summer season, and these facilities were expecting record numbers of these rejoicing children. The day began with high spirits and took on a party-like feeling. However, at the end of this shining day, the festive outlook had vanished and was replaced with tragedy. By the afternoon of that day, two drowning fatalities transpired involving African American adolescent males at separate City of Memphis swimming facilities. The drowning fatalities of Cameron Hogg, 13 years old, at the Pine Hill Community Center, and Demavius Bailey, 15 years old, at the Charles Powell Community Center, were heartbreakingly preventable, and reflected what happens so often to disenfranchised children across the United States (US). Their unintentional deaths, which were unimaginably devastating for families and friends involved, resulted in the immediate closing of all 13 city pools, both outdoor and indoor, for several weeks while investigations ensued. The direct outcomes from these initial investigations were additional intensive lifeguard training, reduction of operating hours for the pools when they finally did open (about five weeks later), and comprehensive policy changes which included photo identification registration cards for any child intending to swim at a city pool. These “pool cards,” which could only be obtained at specific sites in the city, were verification that a supervising adult (e.g., parent or caregiver) agreed to watch the individual child while swimming, that the child was physically able to swim, and that the child would adhere to the rules and regulations of that facility. This necessary, but inconvenient procedural step resulted in many inner-city children losing opportunities to swim.

Research repeatedly reveals that fatal and non-fatal drowning occurs more often within minority populations, specifically African American youth. According to the Center for Disease Control

and Prevention (CDC), fatal unintentional drowning rates for 5-14 year old African Americans are more than three times higher than for their white peers (CDC, 2010). Drowning is one of the most common causes of death and disability for all ages world-wide, but particularly for children under 15 years of age (van Beeck, Branche, Szpilman, Modell, & Bierens, 2005). In the US, drowning is a leading unintentional cause of morbidity and mortality for children from birth to 19 years of age (CDC, 2010). Recent Tennessee data indicate the African American child death rate by drowning was 1.96 (per 100,000) while the rate for white counterparts was 1.08 (Tennessee Department of Health, 2006). Also, drowning is the second leading cause of injury-related death for African American children (birth-19 years) in Memphis (Le Bonheur Children's Medical Center, 2007).

Almost immediately after the double drowning, associated aquatic and child safety groups in Memphis began to meet and discuss how to solve this problem. A collective, collaborative unit was formed and was led by Susan Helms, Director of Injury Prevention and Safe Kids Mid-South, a local coalition of Safe Kids Worldwide led locally by Le Bonheur Children's Hospital. Other community-based groups included the American Red Cross, the YMCA of Memphis and the Mid-South, the City of Memphis Parks Commission, the Jewish Community Center, and other concerned staff from private pool facilities. In keeping with the mantra of Safe Kids, this grassroots network of local aquatic centers, water safety advocates and experts decided to address the following high priority issues: water safety in public and private bodies of water, affordable swimming lessons, and ways to achieve active supervision. The *Make a Splash Mid-South* (MSMS) task force was born and plans began to take shape to realize their mission.

At the same time, another part of this story was developing in a more affluent part of town. Anthony Norris, an African American father of two very young athletes on a competitive swimming team, the Memphis Tiger Swimming (MTS) Club, an established USA Swimming club team based at the

University of Memphis pool, was puzzled. As he surveyed the pool during practices and meets, Anthony noticed an obvious missing element. All swimmers on this team were high level, expert swimmers, but there was little racial/ethnic diversity within the MTS club as well as other competitive teams. Again, this issue is reflected in the statistics. According to their own numbers, USA Swimming, the National Governing Body (NGB) for the sport, reported that 92.5% of their competitive swim club members reported their ethnicity as Caucasian, 4.2% as Hispanic, 1.7% as African American, 1.1% as Asian/Pacific Islander, and 0.5% reported as Native American. Additionally, in 2010, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) reported all men's and women's swim programs' approximate racial identity data for student-athletes were: White 85.6%; Asian 3.3%; Hispanic 3.5%; African American 1.6%; American Indian 0.25%; two or more races 0.75%; and Other was 5%, which included athletes from other countries (NCAA, 2008). Added to these disparaging numbers was the fact that there was only one African American swimmer on the 2008 US Olympic swimming team.

Due to this lack of diversity in competitive swimming and awareness of the drowning disparity, USA Swimming realized that they needed to step up. Since USA Swimming was the nation's ultimate authority on swimming, they were the organization responsible for enhancing all aspects of the sport, which included cultivating more inclusiveness. However, low minority participation in swimming was complicated, and there was little objective empirical research on this problem. Faced with this dilemma, USA Swimming commissioned a nation-wide study targeting minority populations in order to have a more informed understanding of the problem. As fate was to have it, a research team from the University of Memphis was chosen to conduct this landmark research. During the winter and spring of 2008, the first of two national research studies was completed, and the alarming results illustrated that minority children did not have adequate swimming ability. Using a large sample (n=1,680) of mostly underrepresented children from six regionally diverse large cities, this study confirmed approximately 58% African American children and 56% Hispanic/ Latino children were "at risk" swimmers (unable to

swim or comfortable in shallow end only) as compared to 31% of white children. A follow-up USA Swimming study in 2010 using a similar minority-targeted sample of children (n=1,909) from different large US cities found African American respondents reporting a 69% “no or low” swimming ability rate, which equated with the previous “at risk” classification. Hispanic/Latino subjects noted a 57.9% rate as compared to the White rate of 41.8%.

Again, a small dab of destiny contributed to the MSMS task force progressing and going forward. The University of Memphis Vice Provost for Research Support Services, Andy Meyers, who as fortune would have it, was a “swim dad” with a daughter on the MTS club, the same club as Anthony Norris’ children. Andy became more cognizant of the competitive swimming disparity through discussions in the bleachers with Anthony during lengthy practices and swim meets, while at the same time was well aware of the public health disparity of drowning for disadvantaged populations due to the USA Swimming research conducted through his department on campus. It was logical for Andy to put two and two together and unite the researchers with the developing local task force and the eventual MSMS programming aspirations. Additionally, he started connecting relevant university-wide groups which would help to support these goals. One significant group was the Benjamin L. Hooks Institute for Social Change at the University of Memphis (BHI). The BHI’s mission reflected the MSMS initiative in a most compelling manner, and was to be an essential part of the program’s future. The executive director for the BHI, Daphene McFerren, became a pivotal member of this swimming reform for Memphis minority populations with the clear vision that this process needed to be driven by research.

This is just a short version of the beginning and these are just some of the players. Using the May 31<sup>st</sup> drowning incident as inspiration, synergetic connections were made reaching across both impoverished and privileged Memphis communities, which united engaged groups toward common causes; drowning prevention and increasing diversity in swimming. These new connections were to

bring about a cultural paradigm shift and the beginning of a solution to a deadly problem. And, thus, began a journey toward exposing Memphis minority children to safer swimming practices with the caveat of encouraging those who might want to experience a more competitive level of the sport by becoming members of a developmental swim team. This is the story of the *Make a Splash Mid-South* “Learn to Swim” program. This could also be the beginning of your community’s story. It is our hope that this chronicle can inspire your own “Learn to Swim” program in your community.

## Chapter One

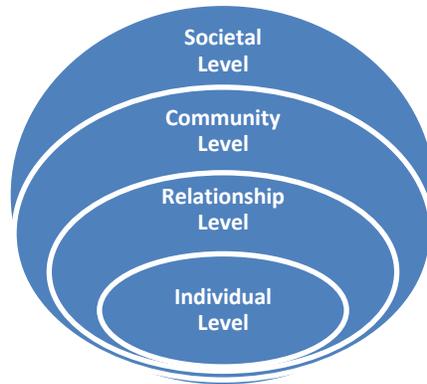
### Make a Splash Mid-South Program Development

The *Make a Splash Mid-South* coalition began to meet on a regular basis as a grass-roots water safety task force, and the beginning framework for a free or low cost swimming lesson program began to take shape. Susan Helms, the Director for Injury Prevention and Safe Kids Mid-South which was housed at the metropolitan children's hospital, Le Bonheur Children's Hospital, was the principal organizer and initial champion for the group. Using the recent double drowning incident as impetus, relevant groups and individuals joined forces. Susan explained, *"No one wanted another child to drown and the excitement for this effort grew by leaps and bounds. I think it was just the right group. With every meeting, enthusiasm grew and new members joined forces."* The very first meeting involved beginning discussions that focused on creative ideas to be put into operation. According to Susan, *"Our first meeting was an open brainstorming session with a huge white marker board and the question was, 'What is the problem?' At the 'get go' we had 100 things that might be reason why there were drownings. And some were very similar so we put them into categories we could easily tackle."*

Effective community-based prevention programs makes certain that there are a range of activities that address multiple groups, or levels, found in a typical community; the individual, the individual's family/friends, the community organizations supporting the individual, and the governmental units that set policy around that individual's way of life. These activities should be developmentally appropriate, administered across the lifespan, and meet the needs for all levels involved. This approach is the Systems Approach or also called the Social Ecological Model (see Figure 1), which the CDC has adopted as their sanctioned theoretical foundation and structure to be employed toward health-related community programming (CDC, 2009). This approach is more likely to sustain

prevention efforts over time than any single intervention as it includes all affected groups. Once all these groups work together, strategies can be applied in a more comprehensive manner.

**Figure 1. The Social Ecological Model (CDC, 2009)**



Keeping this systems approach in mind, Susan began to involve all associated organizations. As the primary advocate for this task force and its mission, Susan knew that she would need to engage other factions to be successful. Specific groups invited to be a part of this task force were; City of Memphis aquatics policy decision-makers, local YMCA administration, American Red Cross staff and administration, private pool managers, and local aquatic advocates.

As a board member of a local YMCA and the Memphis Tiger Swim Club Parent Association, Anthony Norris attended several of the task force committee meetings that summer. Anthony, who is African American, had a young daughter and son swimming competitively for MTS and noticed a lack of racial diversity within the team ranks. He was aware of the racial disparity in the sport, but did not connect this with the high rates of drowning. On top of all of being cognizant of this cultural difference in the pool, during the spring, he had attended the *National Black Heritage Championship Swim Meet* in Orlando, FL, in which his children had participated. He shared his excitement for this event. “It (the swim

*meet) included almost 500 mostly African American children in a very competitive but fun swim meet. It was a real eye-opening experience to see that many competitive swimmers from backgrounds similar to my children.”*

Due to discussions with the USA Swimming diversity director at the *National Black Heritage Championship Swim Meet*, Anthony also had become aware of the newly emerging nation-wide research study commissioned by USA Swimming which confirmed that approximately 58% of the African American youth participants reported they were either unable to swim or were only comfortable in the shallow end of a pool (“at risk” for drowning). Thus, two major questions became Anthony’s focus: How does a community persuade racially underrepresented children involved in swimming, a physical activity in which they did not normally participate? And then how can a community encourage these children to swim competitively? An idea began to germinate in Anthony’s mind which solved both problems with one solution- a free or low cost swimming lesson program with an option to swim on a developmental team in developmental swim meets. Appropriately, the USA Swimming diversity director suggested a name for this unique swim meet; “I Have a Dream... Diversity in Swimming Weekend.”

A third major player in this first phase of the story came forward at about this same time. Andy Meyers, the U of M’s Vice Provost for Research and the Executive Director of the University’s Research Foundation, became a bridge that connected various groups, and amplified the task force energy. Andy, who is White, was well aware of the USA Swimming study because it was conducted by a research team from the U of M’s Department of Health and Sport Sciences and his office supervised the research. Further, his daughter was also a member of the Memphis Tiger Swim Club, and he was a board member of the Parent Association. Andy and Anthony knew each other well due to the many hours spent together in the bleachers as most parents do when they have children on the same team. Andy knew first-hand how excited Anthony was about his experience at the *National Black Heritage Championship*

*Swim Meet. Andy recalled: "And so Anthony's description of his experience really resonated with many people, not just to me, in part because here we are running the largest swim club in town and the minority participation was meager. And we live in a community that's 50% minority. So for some selfish reasons, like the future health of the club and also for the right reasons, we jumped on the idea that these opportunities ought to be available for everyone. Anthony really galvanized us to start to become more a part of the community."*

Planning sessions began at the U of M pool with representatives from all different factions at all SEM levels. Some of these groups were city government officials, local non-profit organizations, and local for-profit aquatic businesses. Plus, on campus groups were accounted for during these meetings as the MTS and the U of M evolved into the center or heart of the new program. Some of these groups were the U of M Nursing Students, the Department of Health and Sport Sciences, the Physical Activity program coordinator, and the Benjamin L. Hooks Institute for Social Change (BHI). The BHI was essential to the development and eventual effectiveness to the swimming program due to its own purpose to support important social justice and change events on campus as well as the community. Thus, it was logical for the U of M to be the "heart" for this solution. It happened to be the academic institution where the new national swimming research had emerged, the campus is physically located near the center of the Memphis community, and it was where Anthony's vision to enhance the MTS club team's diversity while helping disadvantaged children learn a life skill materialized. No matter what the reasons were or when they happened, all motives sparked and intensified the advocacy for the newly developed program: the *Make a Splash Mid-South* "Learn to Swim" program.

Formal meetings were held monthly with various community-based organizations attending. The meetings included not-for-profit and for-profit organizations, which are typically in competition with each other. But the double drowning brought them together at the same table to find a solution.

Discussions included what solutions already exist to help solve this deadly problem. For example, Keith Johnson, the CEO of the YMCA of Memphis and the Mid-South, attended along with Pete Shattuck, a branch executive director of one Memphis YMCA facilities. This particular YMCA branch had a special initiative in place called DEWS (Downtown Elementary Water Safety). This specially created program was delivered to every child at a nearby elementary school, Downtown Elementary, during their physical education time, and highlighted important water safety information. This isolated initiative was inspired by a similar tragedy when two Downtown Elementary children died from drowning the previous summer, and became the archetype for the new program. Susan added commentary regarding the multifaceted nature of the group which added to the variation of the possible solutions: *“What was unique about the meetings was that you had a variety of community and aquatic organizations throughout the area that were involved and at the table at the same time, so we were able to discuss things that worked with some organizations and the areas of need.”* Anthony recalled some organizations that were represented at these initial meetings: *Le Bonheur Children’s Hospital, American Red Cross of the Mid-South, Safe Kids Mid-South, the YMCA of Memphis and the Mid-South, Memphis Tiger Swimming Club, Memphis Jewish Community Center, the Bartlett Department of Recreation City of Bartlett, Tunica (MS) Aquatics, City of Memphis Park Services, Rhodes College Swim Team, University of Memphis School of Nursing, University of Memphis Department of Health and Sport Sciences, the Pool School, and 100 Black Men of Memphis.*

Most of the ideas centered around education and swimming lessons with a heavy emphasis on water safety. Anthony remembered: *“We identified providing swim lessons as one of the first steps. Of course, we would provide water safety tips and instructions, but swim lessons is one of the best ways to help prepare children to be safe around water.”* Since many of the swimming facility specialists were sitting at the table, they noted that the pools during the winter months are less occupied and would be more available for lessons. These facility directors also reported they were always in great need for

qualified lifeguards and swimming instructors. Somewhat unaware of these particular facts, Susan responded: *“And what jumped out at us was that the City of Memphis pools were pretty much underutilized during the winter months. Children were not taking swim lessons- they needed lifeguards, swim instructors, and swim lesson programs available but no one was participating during those winter months. So we said, ‘Let’s start a pilot program! Let’s get kids into the water and into well structured, quality swim instruction.’”*

The need for diversity in the sport of swimming was always an intended outcome of these meetings. Anthony’s moving experience from the diversity swim meet in Orlando was still a part of his personal drive to make a change in Memphis. He talked about this objective as an important part of the whole solution: *“One of the long term goals was to provide access to affordable swim lessons to all children in Memphis City Schools. In the short term, one idea presented was to have the Memphis Tiger Swim team host a diversity meet similar to the one that I attended in Orlando. The demographics in Memphis, as racially balanced as they are, provided what we considered fertile soil to really do something special.”*

The need for more qualified lifeguards and swimming instructors was necessary for the sustainability of any swimming lesson solution. This requirement highlighted the fact that quality supervision is key to educating children and parents about water safety. Plus, good swimmers can become certified lifeguards and swimming instructors which means a future part-time job or a life career in aquatics. One idea that emerged to solve this problem was hosting a “Lifeguard Games” event. This entertaining and light-hearted competition would pit lifeguard against lifeguard representing their various Memphis area organizations (i.e., YMCAs, City Parks & Recreation groups, private pools) in an Olympic-like swimming contest that would also be a fund raiser for the swimming lesson part of the program. Anthony described the intent of the Lifeguard Games: *“It would be a competition between*

*lifeguards which would also raise awareness of the need for teenagers, particularly from minority communities, to learn to swim at a higher skilled level so they could become lifeguards.”*

Children’s lives took precedence and movement began to gather speed. The large group was split into smaller committees (i.e., Lifeguard Games group, Pilot Swim Program group, Diversity Swim Meet group, Fund Raising/Marketing group, etc.) and the groups decided their tasks which were connected to the large group’s goals. As in most community-driven programs, this one or two major “champions” for the initiatives, and this one was no different. Anthony and Susan were the champions for *Make a Splash Mid-South* and they pushed, urged, prodded, coerced, and maneuvered their plan to fruition. They did have collaborators. And these individuals helped take the plan to the next level For example, Anthony explained, *“When we met with David Han, the Aquatic Manager for the City of Memphis Park Services, he explained that the City had several indoor facilities, and that Bickford Community Center and Hickory Hill Community Center were the two that were best suited for swim lessons. The Bickford facility ended up being the ideal location- a somewhat under-utilized indoor pool with lifeguards and water safety instructors that were on staff during our timeframe.”*

Finding an empty pool was easy, but finding minority youth to be a part of this pilot program was a huge hurdle. Parents habitually did not register their children to take part in swimming lessons because they felt their children would get sick going outside during the cold winter months after being in a pool. Healthcare experts would indicate this system of belief is a myth, but minority youth are already at a disadvantage with their overall health status, and this situation can lower resistance to various viruses and diseases. Parents of children in these groups deal with enormous stress daily and one more extra hassle may be the tipping point to depression and other conditions involving anxiety. Because of these factors, using organizations that had credibility with Memphis area at-risk youth populations was discussed and the Streets Ministries was mentioned. This organization assisted

numerous elementary and middle schools' afterschool care needs in the most impoverished areas of town for many years. Anthony recalled: *"I thought that we could partner with a community service organization that served at-risk youth in the communities nearby the Bickford pool. Our first contact was with Street Ministries, which had sizeable aftercare and athletic programs for children who live in minority and underserved communities."*

Research has noted that getting to and from a pool can be a barrier for minority populations (Irwin, et al, 2008). Therefore, transportation, a huge hurdle, was also resolved by using the Streets Ministries. According to Anthony, *"They were willing to provide transportation to and from Bickford, which was a major challenge for parents. This would enable us to work with a captive audience to develop swimmers. Streets Ministries offered to recruit a group of children from its aftercare program."* However, officials from Streets Ministries stated that parent/caregivers did not sign up for this free program due to their fear of drowning, which has been reported in the literature (Irwin, et al, 2008). Anthony remembered, *"When it came time to start the program, the staff weren't able to obtain parental permission for the children to take swim lessons. The parents weren't willing to sign on to this program. The parents were afraid of their child drowning. Another issue was that they were reluctant to have their kids to get in the water in the winter and then their children becoming ill."*

After the failed attempt to work with the Streets Ministries, Anthony had another card to play. All successful organizations have a Plan B, and MSMS was fortunate to have Cynthia Dickerson to be that Plan B, and she was eager to help. Cynthia, a swimmer herself, was a former MTS mom whose son, Milton, went on to swim at the collegiate level at Howard University. And she just so happened to run an afterschool care program near the Bickford pool. According to Anthony, *"I contacted her and said we really need to get kids into the water. You can talk all day and plan forever, but until you produce tangible results, you are not making an impact. Cynthia was very agreeable and as a swim mom*

*understood the importance of swimming, and I think that was the key. She was experienced so she understood. Her son swam competitively, swam in college so she was able to do what probably the director of Street Ministries couldn't do in terms of convincing the parents or at least be able to sell it."*

Cynthia was an accomplished swimmer. Aquatics had been a major part of her early life despite the fact that access to pool facilities was difficult. She recalled, *"I used to go swimming as a young child every single day. We used to walk to the pool. Sometimes the pool would be so far we'd go over the express way, very dangerous place, cross over the golf course with golf balls flying everywhere and go swimming. And back in the evening, the same route."* Later, as an adult, Cynthia taught and coached swimming in Memphis before opening her after-school care facility. Cynthia became involved with the MSMS "Learn to Swim" program due to her friendship with Anthony. At first, Anthony asked her to be a part of the meetings that led to the pilot program due to her minority swimming expertise, but later employed her ability to bring children, the participants, to the program. Cynthia inherently knew that this program was needed as a coach and as a parent of a successful swimmer. Also, the minority health disparity of fatal and non-fatal drowning deeply motivated her to do something positive. On this topic, she said, *"I just can't imagine somebody having a child that does not know how to swim. I mean, it's just unbelievable to me that they could even get to be a teenager and not know how to swim. So it's very important. And then we've had kids who drowned in Memphis it seems like every summer."*

Cynthia was also profoundly aware of the swimming ability disparity that African American children experience in Memphis. Based in her knowledge of the community, she identified a number of practical and attitudinal barriers to minority participation in swimming: *"Well economics is one {barrier}, and transportation. But mostly I think its fear. A lot of the parents that I talked to about this program, they don't know how to swim. They would say, 'I'm so afraid.' You may have some brave parents that say, 'I don't want my child to be fearful like me.' But the majority of them, even the grandmas, they can't*

*swim. You know, people in their family, everybody are non-swimmers. So they just can't see that. And they really don't see the benefits. Like basketball, you can see with basketball that you may get a scholarship; you may go to the NBA. But swimming, now what can you do with swimming?"*

Once the program developers secured a pool and children, the pilot program was initially funded with a \$3,000.00 donation from Safe Kids Mid-South and Le Bonheur Children's Hospital. This seed money was helpful as the MSMS marketing group used this to attract other donors. The money was used to buy swimming equipment for the pilot children and to help fund the swimming lessons. Any funds left over were used toward the culminating swim meet. To ensure that this program would be sustainable and effective, the BHI stepped forward to fund a comprehensive program evaluation. Meanwhile, the other MSMS collaborators were busy organizing a competitive swim meet with a developmental twist; including the future pilot swimmers who were just about to dive into the Bickford pool. A program was born and would be observed closely by many different "parents" as it grew. The *Make a Splash Mid-South* "Learn to Swim" pilot program was about to take its first steps into the water.

## Chapter Two

### Implementation of the Program

The *Make a Splash Mid-South* “Learn to Swim” pilot program began on Monday, February 9, 2009, and included 12 children. The age range was 5-16 years old, with one adolescent male registering for additional swim lessons to perfect his already above average swimming skills so that he would be able to become certified to lifeguard and teach swimming. Most of the children in the pilot group were no older than 12 years. After the program had concluded, nine of the 12 youth participants were interviewed together in a focus group setting, and three parents, all mothers, were interviewed individually on separate days at the after-school care facility which Cynthia owned and managed. For the purposes of anonymity, the names of the children and parents have been changed. The pseudonyms and ages for the children, five males and four females, are as follows: Kevin (age 12), Aaron (age 10), Michael (age 7), Jayden (age 6), and Jeremy (age 6); and Lacey (age 5), Kayla (age 11), Aliyah (age 11), and Keisha (age 7). The parents will be recorded as P1, who had two sons in the program, and the second mother, P2, had two daughters in the program. The third mother’s (P3) child dropped out of the program, but was interviewed as attrition is an important issue with community-based programming. Bickford Community Center (BCC) in the north Memphis area housed an indoor pool facility that would be considered underused at this point in time, which was during the winter months. Parent/caregivers came the first day to register their children, acquire a swim card for each child, and gave their written consent for the research necessary for program evaluation.

After registration was completed, the pilot participants received a swim suit, goggles and a towel, which were considered part of the program. Some parents declined these items as their child already had these, but most accepted the swimming items with smiles and gratitude. The children then went on tours of the locker rooms and changed into their swimming suits.

The BCC aquatics supervisor, Lendzo Parker, was ready to go and knew that this program would shift the paradigm. Like Cynthia, Lendzo was an early swimmer. Although he would have enjoyed competitive swimming, teams did not exist when he was young. Lendzo commented, *“Wish I could have {swam competitively} Back then, swimming was not a big sport, especially for a lot of blacks. I grew up in the ‘60s and ‘70s, and you know how it was back then. There wasn't a lot of {opportunities} for us children.”* Despite this racial barrier, Lendzo made a career out of swimming and working with youth. And he knew exactly why this program was needed in his community. He also was deeply affected by the double drowning and was willing to do whatever he could to alter the status quo. According to him, *“This program was needed because of the drowning, you know, we had not just the two drownings in the city, but the drowning all over. That's what the group, we as a group, getting together was trying to help prevent, drowning.”*

Beyond the notable goal of preventing drowning events, Lendzo also deeply aware of the racial disparity of actual participation in swimming in today's world and in Memphis as compared to what he perceived to be like in other parts of the country. He explained, *“Because, like I said, Afro-Americans, we've never been exposed to swimming. We've only been exposed to football, baseball, and basketball and not swimming. That's sad, that's really sad. And it's different as far as the North, they offer swimming as a P.E. grade. We don't offer swimming, our kids... the inner city schools it's kind of hard because we don't have pools or nothing like that.”*

A research investigator attended that first day ahead of the children to train the facility director and the swimming instructors in survey administration. Each child was given a special participant identification number and a list of the children's names matched to their number was kept by both Lendzo and Cynthia. The short survey, or pre-test, included agree/disagree statements concerning attitudes about swimming, water safety knowledge test items, and self-reported swimming ability. Some

of the children completed the surveys alone, and others completed with adults reading the questions out loud.

After survey administration was complete, the children entered the pool—some for the first time. The Bickford pool was equipped with an easy, sloping ramp with handrails, which most of the new swimmers used, while the other more knowledgeable participants sat on the side in front of the ramp and eased themselves into the shallow end of the pool. All of the inexperienced swimmers had wide eyes and anxious demeanors, and seemed to not really know how to handle this novel situation with some looking back at their parent/caregivers. At this point, the swimming instructors took over and, with huge smiles and soothing voices, dispelled their fears. The swim instructors were encouraging and animated, and their confidence was contagious. The children soon took their lead and they were ready to learn. For most, the next time they looked toward their parent/caregiver, it was to show that caring adult that they were not afraid, or to show off a new swimming skill. Each child was pre-tested for swim ability and then placed in ability groups. Although all of this would be considered a typical swimming lesson start, it was a cultural shifting moment. And, thus, began the *Make a Splash Mid-South* “Learn to Swim” pilot program.

Parental influence or encouragement is an important variable in dealing with physical activity participation. The children’s feelings about how their parents encouraged them to be a part of this program were interesting. Again, most of the group mentioned specifically their mothers as crucial family members advocating for their participation in this program and the activity of swimming itself as an exercise option. This finding matches research that points to African American mothers as being a highly significant influence on their children’s upbringing. This was reflected in the comments from many of the youth participants. For instance, Keisha stated, *“My momma wanted me to go because she didn't get to swim so she want me to swim and she think it's a good exercise.”*

Specific segments of the program were queried, and the children had a lot to say. The group of children had specific feelings about the instructors which were all positive. Swimming instructors were key components to this program. Some comments revealed that the instructors made the lessons enjoyable. Kayla said, *“They made swim lessons fun and not all pushy on us.”* And Keisha followed this previous comment by noting, *“I liked my instructors because pretty much like Kayla said and he told us time by time and not rushing us like, more like help us and not screaming.”* Other participants talked about how well the instructors taught swimming stroke technique. According to Aliyah, *“I thought swimming was hard, but they made it much easier and they helped me on my breath because when I first started I be like always about to pass out so they help me on my breath.”* And Jeremy added, *“Yes, because, they do our backstrokes.”*

Although Lendzo and Cynthia assisted with the swimming lessons off and on, during the “Learn to Swim” program, there were two main swimming instructors, Lee and Curtis (pseudonyms). Curtis had been lifeguarding and instructing at Bickford for approximately 7 years while Lee had only been there about 7 months. Both are African American and both were motivated to help the children in their neighborhood and had had very early swimming lesson experiences, around 4 or 5 years of age. Also, both did not swim competitively. When asked about how they got involved with the MSMS “Learn to Swim” program, they both mentioned the two fatal drowning deaths as inspiration for their participation. Lee commented, *“Since we had the two deaths that passed, the two lives that passed over the summer, that was the main thing that we were gonna involve with the kids to have the free swimming lessons and have the program to prevent that from happening again.”* Curtis added, *“When I was growing up, we had free swimming lessons and you go up there and sign up, your parents sign you up and just come. That's how it was, but now they been charging (a fee) and it's a little bit different and*

*some of these kids get left behind because nobody is there to teach them look your breath and do this and don't do that, and I guess that's you know, it's on us because we work there."*

The swimming instructors were at the very nucleus of this program as they were the pivotal individuals delivering the much needed information regarding water safety and swimming skill. They both were invited to discuss if they knew why this program was conceived and if the goals and objectives were apparent. And Lee specifically knew of and cited the dismal African American swimming ability rate, and said, *"This program helped the kids to become a good swimmer, to later become a competitive swimmer. It's a lot of African American kids that do not know how to swim. It's like 58% of Blacks. I mean African American kids are afraid of getting in the water!"* Curtis added commentary regarding about how to deal with children who may be fearful, *"Everybody's on a different level. You'll take the kids that's ready. The kids if they are on Level I you'll try to get them on Level II and so on and so forth. We assess the level that they on and we try to gradually whatever level they are on gradually move them up step by step, you know. They might be afraid to get in the water so instead of thinking about Level III all I do is concentrate on the things that get them past Level I.*

Lee and Curtis observed not only swimming skill improvement, but mentioned the children's positive attitude toward the program and learning how to swim. Curtis gave this example, *"Well everyday they happy to see us. They always come in and shake our hands. And later say "Look what I learned!"*" Lee recalled, *"Yeah (laughter). They be the first ones. They run, put the clothes on and be eager to try new things tomorrow. They are like, 'What are we gonna do today?' They would say, 'Thank you! I'm glad that you taught me this!' and 'I wanna try this tomorrow!"*

Kevin and Aaron's mother (P1) and Keisha and Lacey's mother (P2) discussed their reasons why they wanted their children to learn how to swim. Information was asked about their own swimming ability and experiences. P1 indicated that she was a confident swimmer and that she had learned from

her mother when she was about 6 years old. The other parent, P2, was uncomfortable in shallow water and fearful of the deep end. She had some experience with learning how to swim from family members when she was about 10 years of age. Also, both P1 and P2 indicated that their children did not know how to swim, and that swimming competence was very important to them. Both mother's thoughts on the elevated minority drowning rates were revealing. This drowning disparity cause great concern, specifically with P2, but the mothers were aware that these lessons could possibly help their children to be safe around water and to save lives. The second parent responded, *"Well yeah, you know, on the news just about every summer they talk about that {drowning}. Well the drownings, yeah, that's the reason why anytime, you know, there's a swimming activity, you know, me or the dad stay close by. I'm always right there because the risk of that is very high."*

Although there were differences regarding swimming experiences between the two parents, both had differences regarding their initial impressions of the program. The first parent was excited about the fact that she wouldn't have to teach her children to swim, and was pleased that the instructors were so patient. The second parent was initially concerned about supervision and a possible accident. However, both parents overwhelmingly approved of the MSMS "Learn to Swim" program. More examples were given as they expanded on their experiences with the "Learn to Swim" program. P1 said, *"I thought the program was good because if I would have taught them it would have been kinda hard because maybe me being a mother, you know, you have to have patience and they (the instructors) were more patient with the kids. And every day when I got ready to come by the house to pick them up when I got off work, they would call and say 'Momma! Come on, come on! We gonna be late for practice!' And everyday they just be ready and every day before they get ready for bed, they always say 'We gonna set out our swim clothes before practice, Mom.'"* P2, who was the more anxious parent noted, *"My initial thought was they make sure that there would be enough supervision for all of the kids,*

*that all the kids are being watched, you know, equally and at the same time. So it won't be any accidents or anything like that. But they did {have fun}. That's number one. They enjoy swimming.*

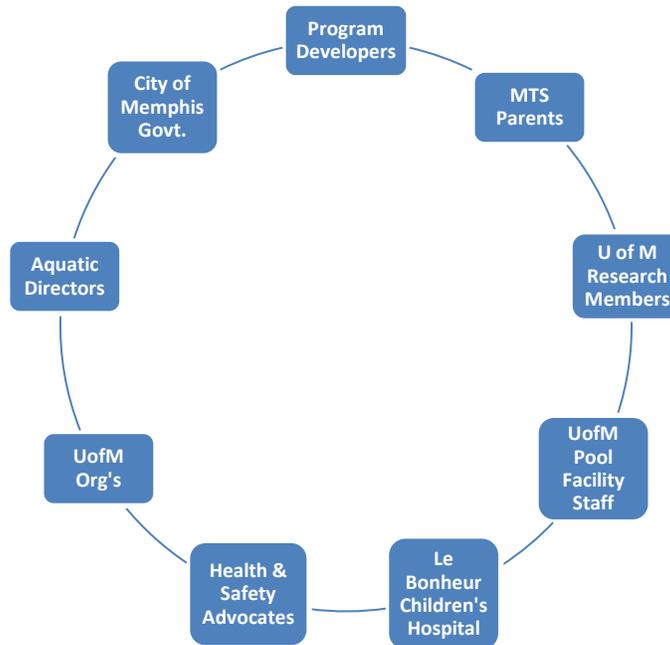
Overall, the children communicated that they enjoyed being in the program. There were a few participants that believed a program like the MSMS "Learn to Swim" program would be beneficial and would work in their neighborhood. Kevin responded, *"It would be good so everybody can learn how to swim."* Also, Kayla added, *"And they won't drown."* Finally, Keisha commented not only on the actual swimming ability issue, but that there would be more, *"It would be good for my neighborhood because everybody should be able to learn how swim in my neighborhood. It would be good, I'll have to wait for her to come to my house and sometimes she has to work so we could like be together and have fun."*

In the meantime, Andy Myers was busy working out the scheduling challenges with the U of M for the "I Have a Dream... Diversity in Swimming Weekend." Anthony and Susan were able to observe the lessons as they started and progressed at the BCC. Their reactions were positive and enthusiastic. Anthony recalled, *"Yes. I observed the very first swim lesson when the kids were enrolled in the pilot program and completed their research surveys. I wasn't even aware of some of the perceptions and attitudes towards the sport of swimming. They seemed pretty eager but also they were a little apprehensive. Curtis and Lee made the kids feel very comfortable. They were so patient taking them step by step, and were really excited and enjoying themselves. The next lesson that I saw, the kids did not want to get out of the water. They were really enjoying themselves and progressing as swimmers."* Susan who was not at the very first lesson was able to see other lessons. She added, *"I didn't see when they began their lessons but I saw them in the middle and they were progressing very nicely."*

Organizational meetings continued through this phase, and increased in number once the impending date for the diversity swimming meet became reality. Members of the U of M research team, who had conducted the national research study, became part of the group and presented their results at

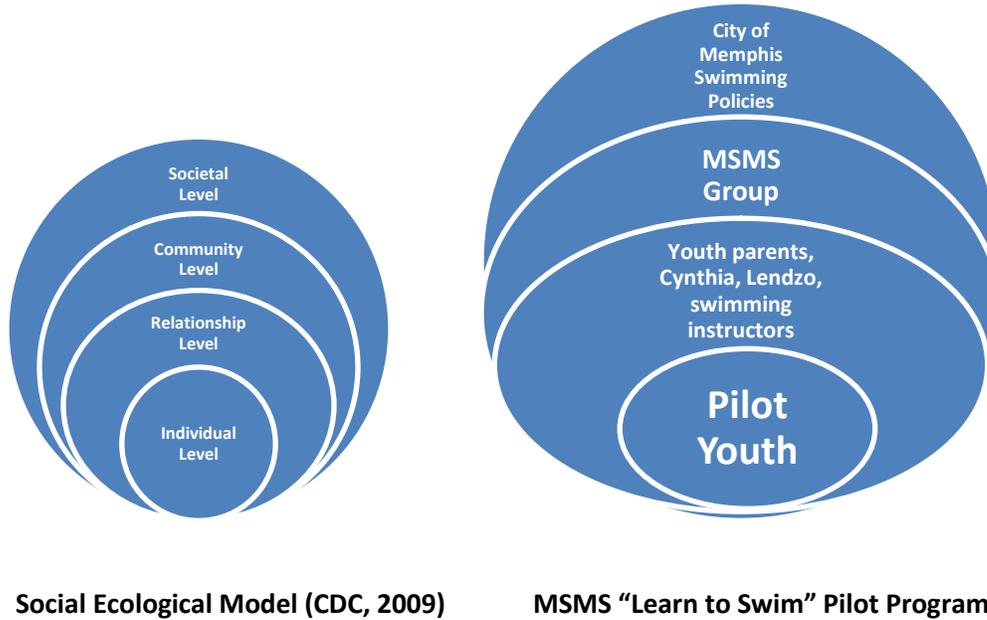
the first meeting, which verified that the MSMS efforts would be valuable. Taking this nation-wide research and making it actionable at the local level is not only a researcher's aspiration, but it typically matches the mission for higher education institutions. Along with the researchers came U of M groups whose goals and objectives matched the MSMS program goals. The Benjamin L. Hooks Institute for Social Change at the U of M (BHI) became an active advocate and also committed funds to cover research expenses. Two members of the national research team from the U of M logically stepped forward and became the research team for the MSMS pilot program evaluation, which fulfilled the research ideal and provided a research record to eventually assist the program to become a better program. Members from the original Water Safety Task Force continued to attend these meetings, and an influx of MTS parents became active and driven during these meetings. Their initial mission was to infuse their club team with more diversity, but the compelling motive of decreasing, and possibly eliminating, fatal and non-fatal drowning incidents for disadvantaged youth in the Memphis area inspired them to support the pilot program. Along with the more moral, intangible reasons to support this program, aquatic facility directors attended these meeting for their own authentic economic purposes. These swimming pool administrators wanted, and desperately needed, a more diverse collection of qualified lifeguards. They inherently knew and openly discussed that it was common sense if racially underrepresented youth became more exposed to swimming, they would come into contact with the job opportunity of being a lifeguard and swimming instructor, and, consequently, there would eventually be a gaggle of minority youth who would grow up to be lifeguards and swimming instructors who would then influence younger children to continue the cycle. The various factions of the MSMS group are visually represented in Figure 2:

**Figure 2. *Make a Splash* Mid-South Members**



The MSMS group was now becoming more diverse itself. There were more minority members whose goal was more children of color in the sport as well as others who were motivated by the drowning issue. Additional members were ones who had business and budgetary reasons to support this program and cause. And there were others, such as Susan and MTS parents who wanted to make a difference, and understood a program like this would fulfill goals for a better Memphis. All of these groups represent the layers that are found imbedded and overlap, very much like Russian nested dolls, in any community prevention programming effort and match the constructs of the SEM seen in Figure 3:

**Figure 3. Social Ecological Model and *Make a Splash Mid-South* “Learn to Swim” Program**



While the children in the pilot program (individual level) were being supported/instructed by their parents, Cynthia, Lendzo, and the swimming instructors (relationship level), the MSMS group (community level) was working hard to create a successful diversity swim meet through the use of personal pleas for donations. Promotional materials such as the logo and fliers were created. A sliding scale of donor dollar amount levels using the Olympic medal designations (gold, silver, & bronze) was developed, and small donations began to accumulate. Also, news media outlet promotions were sought after and certain members of the MSMS group were able to get a popular columnist at the local newspaper to write a column detailing the work of the MSMS unit and the youth learning how to swim. This helped to bring on board the television and radio stations to broadcast support for the program as well as the swim meet. Program developers were interviewed as well as the pilot youth. The media buzz was building a compelling following of community members and set the stage for the culminating event, the “I Have a Dream... Diversity in Swimming Weekend.”

## Chapter Three

### **“I Have a Dream... Diversity in Swimming Weekend”**

The culminating event for the *Make a Splash Mid-South* “Learn to Swim” pilot program that had always been in the works was getting ready to take place. The “I Have a Dream... Diversity in Swimming Weekend” was the end goal of the program, and was to be a fundraiser of sorts. The MTS parents and program developers had been busy working the logistics of this distinctive swim meet while the pilot program participants were busy learning how to swim. During one weekend, there was to be an out-of-season competitive swimming meet with area club teams who were charged an entry fee as a donation toward the program. The timing of the competitive meet was not perfect as this time of year was considered the off-season, and it was difficult to recruit club swim teams from out of town. However, for the first diversity swim meet, a few area teams were able to scrape together a competitive team, and ended up with about 200 competitive swimmers. An additional dilemma was securing the U of M pool facility. The MSMS group was hoping for a donated fee from the U of M, which was difficult to acquire at first. But, in the end, the U of M gave approval and waived numerous fees. Having a high-level administrator (Andy) from the U of M on the team was beneficial as he was able to access the key decision-makers and petition the MSMS case in person. Other personnel necessary for a swim meet (i.e., deck lifeguards, etc.) volunteered their time as well.

The competitive meet between the club teams was to take place on the Saturday and Sunday mornings which the pilot program participants would be able to observe in the bleachers with specially assigned “peer mentors.” These mentors would be able to explain what was happening during the official competitive meet and answer questions. During that Saturday afternoon, a developmental clinic would take place for the pilot program swimmers in which the pilot program swimmers would learn how

to sharpen their swimming strokes, learn flip turns, and practice starts from the starting blocks. All these new competitive swimming skills were to be taught by the various club team swimmers, and the peer mentors. Finally, a short developmental, semi-competitive swim meet would occur early Sunday afternoon so that the pilot program youth could swim in a meet-like setting. The developmental swim meet was very loosely based on rules and regulations for an authentic swim meet, and every MSMS swimmer was to receive a ribbon no matter what place he or she finished.

As an added component, “celebrity timers” were recruited who were given stop watches and specific swimming lanes. After every race, the timer would congratulate the child and tell that swimmer his or her time. Some of these timers were U of M administrators/decision makers, members of the research team, prominent area business leaders, and community elected leaders. Because of media relations support from Le Bonheur and connections within the MTS parent group, the attendance of several city officials and the importance of this program, various media outlets (TV, newspapers, magazines) were there recording for history the results of the program thus far. To organize an event this big required many hands on deck, and there were several bumps in the road. But several factions of the group worked as a sort of tag team to overcome these obstacles. Anthony recalled, *“Obtaining approval to use the University of Memphis pool to host the event was an initial challenge due to my unfamiliarity with the process. We had the good fortune of having Andy Meyers on our team who was on the MTS parent board, is a professor here at the University, and is the Vice Provost for Research to guide us through all the paperwork and administrative hurdles. As a community service outreach event, we lobbied the University to support the event as an in-kind sponsor for the use of the pool.”*

It was essential to have an inside authority such as Andy to help maneuver the various obstacles that an outside entity might not understand. Andy helped overcome these barriers and had this to say, *“The overarching goals were to create an atmosphere that would be supportive of the kids and really get*

*the competitive swimmers involved and host a special clinic to contribute to their developmental needs for competitive swimming creating this unique experience. And for our own club, there was a chance to swim competitively, but also to serve as an example to the novice swimmers and early competitive swimmers that they were mentoring in the afternoon.”*

The MSMS “Learn to Swim” pilot program was coming to the end of the six-weeks of swimming lessons at the Bickford Community Center swimming pool. All pilot program children, even the participants who were not able to swim a length of the pool, were offered a chance to be a part of the “I Have a Dream...Diversity in Swimming Weekend” at the University of Memphis pool. Out of the total 12 children who had been in the swimming lesson part of the pilot program, 9 swimmers and their parents took part in this swim meet. Cynthia, Lendzo and the swimming instructors were ending the lessons, and getting the youth ready for the competitive experience. Regarding this swim meet training, Cynthia mentioned the fear aspect: *“That Friday before the swim meet I tried to make sure that the kids got in the deep end. I wanted them to be comfortable. I made sure that they had a mentor to get in the water with them. I knew one of the parents was afraid that her kids wouldn’t be able to go all the way across. I knew they had the ability but I know people, kids will panic. So I made sure that one of us got in the water with them.”*

The parents also had thoughts regarding the “I Have a Dream... Diversity Swim Weekend” swim meet. This particular segment of the “Learn to Swim” program was viewed differently by the two parents. The first parent was extremely excited about it and indicated that it was a very important ingredient for the program. She recalled, *“Both my sons were at the swim meet. I was there with signs. Oh whee, it was good! They had one-on-one instructions letting them know, you know, it’s OK, don’t be nervous and all that type of stuff. Letting them know things that they had to swim like the 50 and the backstrokes and all that, different techniques that they would have to do.”* The second parent was

unsure about the actual competitive event on the second day (Sunday), but did allow her children to take part in the clinic and watched the competitive swim meet on the first day (Saturday), which indicates that educating and supporting the parents would have been helpful. The second parent continued to be nervous about her children swimming: *“My daughter went to the event they did that Saturday and I didn’t really have a clear understanding about the actual swim meet that Sunday. I thought they were going to leave the kids on their own to swim and I was really nervous about that so we didn’t attend.”* However, the second parent added, *“But we went that Saturday. It was at the University of Memphis in their little swim area in the indoor pool area. And it was pretty nice. It was different kids from different community centers and each one of them had their own personal instructor. They gave them personal time, you know, to enhance whatever skills that they needed. So I enjoyed that. I enjoyed watching that.”*

Lendzo attended the entire weekend, and included the diversity swim meet in his responses concerning the pilot program and how it rounded out what the children should know about swimming. He added that even if the children had seen a swim meet on television, the experience is totally different in person, *“They got a hands on experience of being in the water, racing against somebody and see what they can do and all of that. Oh yeah. They were happy, you know. And smiling? You never seen a child smile so big! And they were able to see the ribbons and everything after that.”*

The children were also asked to talk about their experiences with the diversity swim meet. Their specific experiences were interesting and indicated that it was an enjoyable and educative event, except for Aliyah who described, at the beginning, how she became afraid once she realized that she would be in a competitive race, but as time went on, she realized that she was ready for this experience: *“I was scared. I was crying. I didn’t want to, I thought we were doing the swimming final which we didn’t practice but then I kind of got used to it.”* And Keisha also had an initial bad experience, but indicated

she had a enjoyable time: *“At first water got in my nose twice and I was not able to swim and then I got a ribbon swimming on my back.”*

The MTS parents filled in as volunteers to run the meet. Current and past MTS club team members as well as other experienced swimming volunteers were assigned “mentees” and instructed that they were the special chaperones for each child. They were told to expect an overwhelmed child and were shown techniques to make their mentee feel comfortable. There was a room adjacent to the pool that was used as a “Hospitality Room” where they could go and indulge in a donated snack and bottle of water. Two of the adult peer mentors were interviewed; Jacqueline (22 years old) and Curtis (28 years old) who was one of the swimming instructors. Jacqueline and Curtis, both African American, learned to swim at an early age and both have certifications to be a lifeguard and swimming instructor. Jacqueline swam competitively from the age of 7 years through her college years. She also swam for the MTS club team. Both Jacqueline and Curtis commented often about their unique swimming experiences during their youth and how they related to their mentees. When asked about how they both got involved with being a mentor for the MSMS “Learn to Swim” program participants, Jacqueline mentioned an interesting side-note of why she got involved with the program, *“As a MTS alum, Anthony Norris called me up. I met him and his daughter about 3 years back swimming in the pool. I was another black swimmer and he was really curious. He was like you know you don’t really see black swimmers in the water much and my daughter is a swimmer you know she’s on a swim team where we don’t see many people of our race in this sport. I started being a mentor for [his daughter] and then he called me up about uh a few months ago and told me um everything that’s been rolling with this and asked me if I’d be a part of the [diversity swim meet].”*

Both Jacqueline and Curtis shared that they were very clear on what they were to accomplish during their mentor-time with their mentee. They both reported that they were given good instructions

and directions from the event planners. They were told to help with a swimming stroke clinic during the afternoon of the first day and to be a role model for that child. Jacqueline had an insightful comment regarding her own memories of someone who was a mentor to her during her early years of swimming: *“Just before we went out I remember the MTS coach saying, ‘You remember what it was like when you were little and someone maybe a bigger kid was teaching you for the first time. It wasn’t necessarily about what they were teaching you and the techniques, it was about the fact that like you have this great swimmer, a great mentor beside you holding your hand and supporting you in what you’re doing.’ That was the important part of this so if you can just get that one child to feel comfortable getting into the water. But most of all, get that child to be confident in themselves, to stand next to them as you know a brother or sister would, to feel comfortable with the relationship that you have with them being that supporter, being that older person.”*

The peer mentors were also responded to why they thought this program was created and why there was so much interest in the issue of swimming programs for minority youth produced noteworthy remarks from both. Jacqueline responded, *“It is so rare that you see a minority in the pool or involved in this type of event. And this isn’t from a statistic; this is just from my experience as a swimmer for the past 17 years. I’d go to swim meets with 700, 800 people and I’ll be the only black girl there for that matter, the only minority there and what that experience said to me was ‘Black people don’t swim’ and I was like ‘Wait, why don’t black swim?’ And then it takes an event like this to show the city, to show the nation that it’s not that minorities don’t swim, it’s not that we don’t, because we can and we are going to show you we can.”* Curtis also was aware of the issues that minority populations encounter and how these barriers can be insurmountable: *“Minorities, most of our families we have like four or five kids and most of the time it’s a single parent and they take care of their necessities first and then, you know, everything else comes last. What comes last is probably swimming trunks, goggles, you know things that people*

*want to go swimming so a lot of times we just can't, we underprivileged so it's a need for us to have knowledge about the water and the basic things you supposed to do around and in the water."*

Along with the experiences from swimming in the meet, the pilot program children talked about their peer mentors. This part of the program seemed especially successful as all children involved with the swim meet indicated they enjoyed having a mentor at such a new event. Many of the responses detailed how the mentors helped to fine tune their strokes which helped them swim more efficiently. Aliyah remembered her mentor (name has been changed) and responded, *"Her name was Caroline and she was a year older than me. I liked her! She taught me how to do the butterfly, kick and to stroke. She taught how to keep my arms straighter when I do my stroke and she taught me how to breathe better."*

The parents also talked about the peer mentors assigned to the children at the swim meet. Both parents were very positive about this special part of the diversity swim meet. And their comments indicated that the mentors did exactly what was expected; to help the new swimmers feel comfortable and confident about competitive swimming. The first parent noted, *"They taught them different techniques and got them prepared for what they were going to do when they called their names for the race. Both my boys loved their mentors! That's all they talked about! They learned a lot from them because Aaron, he was a little nervous, but really Kevin, he just was panicking because he just felt that you know that he was gonna mess up but his instructor was letting him know it's OK to feel this but just do your best."*

Both mentors told what they learned about their mentees during the diversity swim meet. Additionally, the mentors discussed their mentee's individual characteristics and emotions from that day. Curtis recalled, *"All of them were excited! It was they didn't care if they won second or fifth, you know, it was uh beautiful. Everybody got a ribbon. Everybody was excited."* And Jacqueline added, *"He gave me a high five and skipped over with his brother and then before I left he gave me a hug."*

The impact of this part of the MSMS “Learn to Swim” program was an aspect that the mentors experienced intimately, and they were asked to expand on this point. Jacqueline discussed these issues from a competitive swimmer standpoint, *“I identified with some things that they might have experienced more than the actual swimming than the actual race...the experience of just being around the other kids that were there for the same reasons that the person that was there, and the energy. I think that they really enjoyed seeing that with the other kids and with the mentors, coaches and parents. It’s funny that I saw that they were keying into the camaraderie the first day that I was there. It really took me years to figure out that’s what I enjoyed most about swimming.”* Curtis gave his opinions based on his teaching experience first followed by his encounter with the swim meet *“I know they enjoyed the swim meet. Well, the kids, they, everyday during the lessons, they happy to see me, and they eager to learn. At the swim meet, they was, a lot of them asked me can they come up, you know, on their own time and I was, I told yeah they can come{to the Bickford swimming pool} anytime they get ready.”*

Each program developer discussed their thoughts about the “I Have a Dream... Diversity in Swimming Weekend.” Again, each program developer had similar answers about the event. Anthony responded, *“The swim meet was a reward for their hard work learning to swim but also exposed them to the next step, which was competitive swimming. Not only would they get the experience, the joy, and the reward of competing, but were able to observe more experienced peers from the MTS team to see what was possible if they continued developing their newly acquired swimming skills.”* Andy added, *“The Sunday afternoon session was beyond fun. You could see and hear the kids struggling to get across the pool and the crowds cheering and a couple of times having to have one mentors jump in the water and encourage the kid whose clinging to the lane rope, it was great. It was just wonderful.”*

At the end of the event, nearly all participants and organizers were thrilled with what transpired at the “I Have a Dream... Diversity in Swimming Weekend.” This culminating experience was the ideal

way to close out the MSMS “Learn to Swim” pilot program. It simultaneously and geographically placed all parties in concert, which uncovered all facets of the program. All involved factions of this community-based program celebrated the occasion together. This day, which was considered to be the end, was actually the beginning as the MSMS “Learn to Swim” program continued forward as a fully fledged initiative in the Memphis area. The awe-inspiring “call to action” that had started as a small water safety task force attempting to solve a socially complex problem that led to the drowning deaths of two Memphis teens, had began a domino-effect of community energy toward common goals; to increase diversity in the sport of swimming and to decrease, and possibly eliminate, fatal and non-fatal drowning for all children.

## Chapter Four

### Program Outcomes

Capturing the data and analyzing the results from the pilot program was important to the success of the *Make a Splash Mid-South* “Learn to Swim” program. In order to pinpoint positive, as well as the not so positive, segments of any community-based initiative, program evaluation utilizing a comprehensive plan is recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 1999). Additionally, sponsors for community-based programming generally require a detailed report regarding program outcomes to be delivered which then help to determine the effectiveness of their donated dollars as well as if the sponsorship should continue.

The evaluation for the *Make a Splash Mid-South* (MSMS) “Learn to Swim” program used a mixed method design and followed guidelines from the CDC Framework for Program Evaluation (CDC, 1999). A mixed method plan is recommended with youth programming because both quantitative and qualitative data achieve a more holistic analysis of the key processes and outcomes (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Methodological strategies also met CDC recommendations for measures specific to assessing intervention-type program goals. Importantly, this research was funded by the Benjamin L. Hooks Institute for Social Change (BHI) at the U of M. This campus-based center’s mission closely matched the goals for the program, and support for the MSMS “Learn to Swim” program was logical and connected with the constructs of the Social Ecological Model (SEM-see Figure 3 in Chapter 2). The evaluation was conducted by research representatives from the Department of Health and Sport Sciences in the College of Education at the U of M who conducted the national study and the Center for Research in Educational Policy (CREP). Permission for this research evaluation was applied for and granted by the U of M Institutional Review Board.

## **Procedures**

In collaboration with community research partners, specifically the Local Advisory Board of Directors from the BHI and the MSMS Task Force members, twelve Memphis minority youth were recruited from an after-school care facility to participate in the “Learn to Swim” pilot program and served as the main research participants within the study. Active consent for each research participant was obtained and parent/caregivers were required to formally register their child for an official aquatics card with the City of Memphis. The pilot study youth completed pre/post test surveys and participated in a single focus group interview. The children were present for a majority of all the lessons, but each child sporadically missed some lessons due to illness, family trips, forgetting their swimming suits, and spring break. Many youth participants attended and swam in the two-day diversity swim meet at the conclusion of the program.

Parent/caregivers were asked to take part in this research through the use of focus groups and personal interviews. Other key stakeholders included in this qualitative analysis were: Program Developers (Anthony Norris, Andy Meyers, & Susan Helms), Afterschool Care Facility Director (Cynthia Dickerson), BCC Aquatics Director (Lendzo Parker), Swimming Instructors (Curtis & Lee), and Swim Meet Mentors (Jacqueline & Curtis). Reasons for attrition are important information regarding program effectiveness (Weisman & Gottfredson, 2001) and one parent whose child had dropped out of the program was interviewed.

### ***Quantitative Measures-***

Process and outcome measures that were descriptively analyzed to complete the “Learn to Swim” program evaluation are as follows:

- Program attendance and program withdrawal (attrition) numbers.

- Swimming Involvement Inventory (SII) – attitudinal survey and knowledge test (pre & post intervention); also measured basic demographic information.

The SII was a shortened version of the survey used in the USA Swimming nation-wide study (Irwin, Drayer, Irwin, Ryan, & Southall, 2008) which scored a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.80 indicating a sufficient level of internal reliability. Basic water safety and swimming skill acquisition objective questions (10) were added to measure knowledge gained through the intervention. Also, standard demographic information was queried. The content validity of the instrument was supported by a panel of experts representing the fields of education, physical activity, swimming, and diversity issues. The panel reviewed the SII favorably and their input for improvement was applied to the final version. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 15 was used to conduct all descriptive analyses. Due to attrition, there were a total number of eight matched pre/post tests.

### ***Qualitative Measures-***

The primary source of qualitative data was semi-structured interviews. One-on-one interviews were conducted with adult participants and focus group interviews were conducted with youth participants. In all cases, interviews were guided by a structured protocol. Separate protocols were developed by the research team for each stakeholder group (i.e., youth participants, parents) to assess their unique perspective on the program. Key items and prompts in these protocols were also informed by results from the USA Swimming nation-wide study (Irwin, Drayer, Irwin, Ryan, & Southall, 2008) and the SII (pre & post test) results. The protocol was structured around key issues of interest and included prompts on specific topics but questions were open-ended in nature to allow for a free-flowing conversational tone. Most interviews were conducted within two weeks of the conclusion of the MSMS “Learn to Swim” program. All interviews were administered by a trained and experienced evaluator, who is African American. This individual tape recorded and transcribed all the interviews, Interviews

with all the various connected groups helped to ensure trustworthiness through the process of triangulation and the incorporation of multiple perspectives.<sup>22</sup> The trustworthiness of findings presented here was also enhanced through peer-debriefing among members of the research team and member-checking, a process whereby key stakeholders and evaluation participants who were familiar with all aspects of the project were invited to review final interpretations. These various procedures helped to refine the team's interpretations and no significant errors or inconsistencies emerged.

## **RESULTS**

There were a total of 12 research participants in the MSMS "Learn to Swim" program. Eight children completed the entire program with six participating in the "I Have a Dream... Diversity in Swimming Weekend" swim meet. Quantitative data were gathered before the qualitative, and, therefore, will be reported in this manner.

### **Quantitative Analysis**

Eight participants completed and were matched on both the pre and post intervention SII questionnaires. Although the response rate for this sample is relatively high (75%), the actual number of participants is low (N=8). Interpretation of quantitative results from this small group should be with discretion and are meaningful only for this particular group of children during this program. Of these eight, there were six males and two females, with seven participants reporting their racial identity as African American and one child choosing the Multi-racial category and specifically indicating African American, White, and Native American as the three major racial identities. Age range in years for these participants was 6-16 with the average age of 10.1 years. The oldest participant, the 16 year old, participated in the program to refine his swimming skills with the goal of becoming a lifeguard and competitive swimmer.

## **Swimming Ability**

Self-report swimming ability, both pre and post-intervention, can be found in Table 1. Swimming instructors were asked to confirm these results and agreed that the self-reported swimming ability ratings matched their American Red Cross swimming skills checklists. These numbers along with the confirmation from the instructors demonstrate that the program was effective with enhancing swimming ability of the research participants.

Table 1. Swimming ability results for the MSMS “Learn to Swim” pilot program

	N
<u>Swimming Ability (Pre-Intervention)</u>	
Unable to swim	1
Can swim a little; don’t like the deep end	4
Can swim a little in the deep end; one pool length	1
Able to swim 2 pool lengths	1
Could swim competitively	1
<u>Swimming Ability (Post-Intervention)</u>	
Unable to swim	0
Can swim a little; don’t like the deep end	0
Can swim a little in the deep end; one pool length	4
Able to swim 2 pool lengths	1
Could swim competitively	3

## **Attitudes Toward Swimming**

The 20-item attitudinal segment of the SII used a 4-point Likert scale for each statement: 1=Strongly disagree (SD); 2=Disagree (D); 3=Agree (A); 4=Strongly agree (SA). Results for both pre and post-tests can be found in Table 2. Due to the small number of children, frequencies were reported for each response to each statement. A newly created categorical gauge was applied to these frequencies

which established levels of positive attitudinal change from pre to post intervention concerning swimming situations described in each statement. This measurement mechanism was based on numbers calculated within each of the two major categories of Disagree (SD+D) and Agree (SA+A) for each statement and compared pre and post test. If there was no change in actual Likert number choice within each category, that statement earned a "NC" (no change). If the Disagree/Agree categories changed post-intervention by one or two Likert numbers in a positive direction, that specific statement garnered a "SI" (small improvement), and if the encouraging change was three or more, that item scored a "GI" (good improvement). Missing data was not accounted for in this analysis.

Out of the 20 attitudinal statements compared pre and post test, there were no items that showed a negative attitudinal change and only five items scored a no change value (NC). However, the other 15 items showed improvement (9=SI; 6=GI). Overall, these results confirm that this program developed positive attitude change toward swimming.

Table 2. Frequency results for pre/post-test SII attitudinal statements

Statement	Pre-Test				Post-Test				Change
	Disagree		Agree		Disagree		Agree		
	1 SD	2 D	3 A	4 SA	1 SD	2 D	3 A	4 SA	
I am the swimming type	0	0	2	6	0	0	5	3	NC
Would swim more if I had someone to go with	1	0	1	5	0	1	2	5	NC
Like to swim because I am a good swimmer	0	4	2	2	0	0	1	7	GI
Don't like to swim; shape I am in (not fit)	3	1	1	2	5	2	1	0	GI
Don't like to swim; hair wet	6	1	1	0	8	0	0	0	SI
Don't like to swim; how I look in a swim suit	6	0	1	1	5	2	0	1	SI
Don't like to swim; I am shy	6	2	0	0	7	1	0	0	NC
Afraid of drowning; injury	0	3	2	3	5	1	0	2	GI
Don't have the right equip.	1	2	1	4	8	0	0	0	GI
Don't enjoy swimming	5	2	0	1	8	0	0	0	SI
Don't like going to a pool; different from others	7	0	1	0	8	0	0	0	SI
Aware of a competitive swimmer; they are special	3	2	1	2	1	0	3	4	GI
Like to swim; best exercise	1	1	3	3	0	0	2	6	SI
Like to swim; improve skills	0	0	2	6	0	0	2	6	NC
Like to be on a competitive swimming team	0	2	4	2	0	1	2	5	SI
Swimming is for me	0	0	3	5	0	0	3	5	NC
Swimming can help me make money (job, scholarship)	0	2	2	4	1	0	3	4	SI
Everyone; learn to swim	0	1	3	4	0	0	3	5	SI
Swimmers are mostly White	3	2	2	1	5	1	0	2	GI
Parent encourages me; swim	0	1	4	3	0	0	2	6	SI

### **Water Safety Knowledge**

The SII included five multiple choice and five true-false items based on water safety and swimming skill knowledge that research participants answered pre and post-intervention. Again, data were analyzed only as frequencies only due to the low sample size, and were calculated as correct answers only (see Table 3). These results show improvement from pre to post-test for six of the 10 knowledge questions and no change for three items. The only item that demonstrated a decrease in correct answers was the true-false item that involved doctor's recommendations for swimming as the

best exercise. The “no change” items included information on what a non-swimmer should be able to do in a pool, that lifeguards always prevent drowning, and that it is possible to drown in a bathtub. All other water safety and swimming skill information questions showed improvement when compared pre/post. In general, this portion of the evaluation indicates a cautiously positive outcome pointing to program effectiveness.

Table 3. Frequencies of correctly answered knowledge items pre and post test (N=8)

Knowledge Test Item	Pre-Test	Post-Test
<u>Multiple Choice Questions</u>		
First step in helping a drowning person	1	2
What a non-swimmer should do	6	6
Most important water safety rule; don't swim alone	1	3
First swimming stroke learned	5	6
How to be safe on a boat	2	3
<u>True-False Questions</u>		
Lifeguards always prevent drowning	4	4
Doctors recommend swimming as best exercise	8	7
Swimming is safe if you learn how to swim	0	4
You can drown in a bathtub	2	2
First learn to float and then swim	6	7

### Qualitative Analysis

Analysis of the research participants and stakeholders' perspectives of the program was achieved through formal interviews using either focus group or one-on-one arrangements. An African-American research assistant, Evelyn Okunbor, who is experienced in qualitative procedures, carried out all interviews and focus groups. She also completed all transcriptions of these discussions. It was important that the person in this role be a member of the same minority group so that the children and the adults would feel as comfortable as possible when discussing potentially painful memories or

unpleasant topics related to diversity in swimming. Portions of the interviews are shared to incorporate participant voice and contextualize the findings of this evaluation.

When asked about their future swimming participation and if they would continue to swim, the entire pilot study group of children excitedly answered together, “Yes, ma’am!” The children clearly gave verbal evidence that they learned how to swim or at least enhanced their swimming ability. Typical comments were, *“I can swim way better!”* And some comments detailed the specific skills that were newly learned and improved. Jeremy’s response was representative, *“I can swim better. I’m getting good at swimming. I learned the breaststroke and I know how to don’t run, don’t dive into the pool without looking.”*

The parents also responded to the MSMS “Learn to Swim” program’s effectiveness in a positive manner. Further, the second parent who had been the more nervous of the two about swimming in general added a comment that was intriguing in that she might not have ever considered swimming lessons for her children without this program, *“Yeah, it’s a great idea. Because it gives the kids an opportunity that they probably wouldn’t normally have. Because normally I put her in classes like dance class and ballet and probably would have never thought to put her in a swim class.”*

When asked about what she thought the goals and objectives for the MSMS “Learn to Swim” program were, Cynthia mentioned educating the children on swimming skills and water safety information. She also discussed a situation with one participant who was older (16 years old), and actually took part in the program to improve his swimming skills and to eventually be qualified as a lifeguard: *“Knowing how to swim could change your life if you could get on a swim team, you could maybe be a lifeguard, which we have one person that was in the program that is actually going to be working this summer. He is going to be a lifeguard this summer. Now he could swim, you know. So it wasn’t like, it’s not like he, you know, wasn’t a swimmer. He had some pretty good strokes. But I think*

*this really kind of, you know, geared him to say, 'Ok I can do this.'” So, not only did this program enhance the swimming ability of the participants, it also helped one young man develop employable skills. Also, Cynthia also talked about how high school coaches could benefit from more minority children learning how to swim, “The high school coach, the one who took my place, was so excited. When I was coaching the team, sometimes when we had tryouts, we actually had to teach swimming to some of these kids. And I said to her, ‘Wouldn't it be wonderful if the ninth graders came to you and they already know how to swim? (Laughter)’”*

There were 12 children total who had registered for the program, but only eight completed the entire program with six participating in the diversity swim event. Cynthia was asked about the children who had dropped out and if she knew of the reasons why they might not have finished with the other children. Again the fear factor was brought up and how this fear can be a huge barrier: *“We had a few drop out initially. We had two people who just didn't come back. They were terrified. They did really well, but I guess they were, you know, they didn't seem to be frightened or panicking. But when they got their clothes on they were gone!”*

One parent (mother) of a child who dropped out of the program was interviewed. Her child was a 6-year-old boy who told her that he “didn't like the water in his face.” This mother was asked about her own swimming ability and indicated that she could not swim and was “scared of holding her breath under water,” although she did confirm that all her “brothers and sisters know how to swim.” The mother did mention that she would like to try the swim lessons again with her son, but her husband, the child's father, would have to take their son to the pool. The father was an over-the-road truck driver and was absent from home often, and was gone during the MSMS “Learn to Swim” program. She felt as though her son would not drop out if the father was there supporting and pushing him to participate.

The mother did conclude the interview with the comment that all her “children love to swim during the summer and not much in the winter.”

Lendzo and the swimming instructors took pride in their accomplishments and understood that this program was giving the children a life skill that was precious. Lendzo gave compelling examples of how the children grew during the program: *“When they first started, they would say, ‘Oh I don’t want to do that.’ But when they got into it, couldn’t get them out of water. Never want to go, stay all day, keep passing the time, never want to get out.”* Lendzo was also asked about the parents of the participants. He was very upbeat about their interest and attitude regarding the program. And he used his years of experience in aquatics to voice his opinion about the parents’ role as an essential part of a child’s ability to swim, *“If parents are more supportive, the kids are going to do more. So we have to get a lot of parents involved. They got to get into the water. That encourages the child. We had a Grandma showing them how to swim.”*

Program effectiveness was discussed and Lendzo held high opinions of the program’s positive accomplishments. He was extremely happy about their swimming ability, their confidence in the water, and their exposure to swimming competitively. He discussed how they improved overall, *“Probably all of them were ‘at-risk’ swimmers, but one or two. As they go, the more they come, the more they get it. And you can see the difference. And a lot of them swim to the deep end; they got in the deep end and swam no problem. And the kids learning to swim and then competing too. We were kind of skeptical about them being ready but we did what is called a miracle.”* Lendzo completed his interview with final comments about the program, and these final remarks explain the base philosophy that has kept him in the youth programming vocation for his entire professional career: *“Teach these kids how to swim and you know maybe they can pass something and say, ‘Look here, these kids swimming for the first time from the Make a Splash and maybe I need to... just pass on down to your cousin or somebody.’ Just like I*

*said, passing that chain. That's how you pick up the sponsors too. Well why wouldn't I put my money into something like this? It works."*

The instructors gave positive feedback about the effectiveness of the program and if the children were impacted from attending. Both agreed that the program was valuable to the youth involved and that it should continue on a larger scale. Curtis responded with a water safety issue and a child health point, which both were amended with this program, *"Just getting people involved and making them think about it's real important to know how to swim and it's important to know different things like what to do if a person drowning. You can be walking by the river or something and somebody fall and slip in there."*

The mentors were asked how the program might be improved. Both mentors indicated that they thoroughly enjoyed the program, but Jacqueline wanted more time to be with her mentee. She discussed how the actual event was distracting and because of this, she was not able to give her mentee her full attention. However, she offered a possible solution to allow mentors more time with their mentees: *"It would be great to have maybe a lunch or something right after. But there were a lot of distractions going on. I couldn't really key into him and ask him other things like what he likes to do, like what he wanted to do long term with swimming and all that. I mean we had fun in the process but it was over so quickly that I feel like I didn't get to learn enough about him."* Both mentors talked about the most meaningful part of their role during the diversity swim meet. Their responses were clear and focused on the children. Jacqueline recalled, *"For me, it was stepping back and observing and watching. It was very meaningful to be in the pool with my mentee."* Also, Curtis added, *"Interacting with kids and teaching them safety in the water and out the water. It is fun interacting with different kids and learning what makes them tick."*

The children gave their input on their overall assessment of the diversity swim meet. They were all excited about this particular event, and some seemed to be willing to be a part of a competitive swimming team in the future. They noted that all received ribbons for participating and many earned ribbons for placing in specific races during the developmental swim meet. Most had affirmative responses to the question about if they would ever like to be on a team and compete in swim meets like the one they had experienced. Kayla specifically commented on which team she would like to swim for one day in the future, *“Yes I want to be with the (MTS) Tigers!”*

At the end of the *Make a Splash Mid-South* “Learn to Swim” pilot program, the smiles from the children said it all. Summing up, the work, time, and emotional highs and lows were measured by small, happy faces. Process outcomes and focus group responses overwhelmingly indicated that the “Learn to Swim” pilot program was effective and should move forward to reach and teach more Memphis area children.

## Chapter Five

### Lessons Learned- The Good and the Bad- and the Future

The *Make a Splash Mid-South* “Learn to Swim” pilot program, a unique Memphis community-based initiative, emerged as a positive response to the tragic drowning deaths of two adolescent African American boys. Fatal and non-fatal drowning events occur more often with children of color (CDC, 2009), and variables associated are layered with obscure social complexities (Hastings, Zahran , & Cable, 2006). Despite all the pit falls and land mines, the original “Learn to Swim” plan overcame these barriers to produce an effective program for the participants. Outcomes from the pilot program matched set goals and objectives that were determined during the creation of the program. These goals and objectives were based on previous research, and were achieved using group cohesiveness, individual determination, and cooperation from several organizations and agencies.

#### **The Good and the Bad**

Although the quantitative results were drawn from a small sample, all frequencies indicated positive outcomes for swimming ability, swimming knowledge, water safety information, and attitudes toward swimming. According to self-report and confirmation from the swimming instructors, there were five participants who were either unable to swim or who were uncomfortable in the deep end of a pool and only one that felt as though he/she could swim competitively at the beginning of the program. At the end, there were no participants in the “at risk” category, and instead of just one, there were three children who could swim competitively. Attitudes on 15 of the 20 statements on the SII either improved slightly or had a good improvement on the post-test. There was above average knowledge gain regarding water safety and swimming skills with correct answers on six of the 10 knowledge questions during the post-test. Overall, the quantitative results clearly show that this program was successful in

achieving a higher level of swimming ability and knowledge within a six week time frame, as well as affected more positive attitudes toward swimming with this group of participants.

The extensive qualitative results were rich and revealing. The children gave insightful responses to all questions and overwhelmingly enjoyed the program as did the parents interviewed. The one parent of a child who dropped out indicated that the program was not the problem, but the child's fear as well as her own fear of the water, and frustration of dealing with a spouse whose job took him away from the home frequently were the main factors for her decision to stop attending. All other parties involved, with a high level of agreement, conveyed that the program was valuable and that it was successful. Some interesting information that came out of the focus group and individual interviews are summarized below:

#### The Participants--

- Children are confused by trying to determine/describe their own swimming ability. The swimming instructors helped verify their actual ability.
- The participants mentioned that their parents were very important in advocating for the swimming experiences.
- Some of the children felt as though the other children in their neighborhoods might not enjoy or take advantage of a program like the "Learn to Swim" program because they had bad attitudes and would start fights. However, some did think the program would be beneficial because everyone needs to learn how to swim.
- Although one child confirmed she did not enjoy the swim meet, most of the others were very enthusiastic about the meet and the developmental clinic.

#### The Parents—

- The two parents interviewed had divergent swimming backgrounds. The one parent who could swim well was very supportive of the program, while the other parent, although supportive of the program in general, was mostly concerned about the supervision of the children while they were swimming.
- Both parents thought their children thoroughly enjoyed the program.
- Both parents thought the program was too short and wanted the program to cover a longer time frame.
- The one parent who was a good swimmer enjoyed the swim meet, and the other parent seemed to be more nervous about the swim meet, but still indicated that she thought it was a good experience.

- The lone “drop out” parent interviewed might have been overwhelmed due to her husband being absent from the home. This factor should be considered as many children of color live in households headed up by single mothers who might be just as inundated, or more, by parental responsibilities.

#### The Instructors—

- The two swimming instructors, who both are African American, are well aware of the disparity of drowning and swimming ability with minority children. Both were frustrated with how to solve the problem.
- Both were affected deeply by the two drowning deaths that occurred in Memphis.
- Both were enthused by the “Learn to Swim” program with the only caveats of needing to make the program bigger and reaching more children.
- One suggestion of how to reach more children was to institute it into the schools. In Memphis (as in other areas of the country), there are pool facilities in very close proximity to elementary schools, and sometimes right across the street.

#### The Swim Meet Mentors—

- The mentors, who were both African American and lifelong swimmers, knew exactly what the participants were going through during the swim meet. If possible, more African American swimmers should be recruited as mentors for future programming notes.
- Both felt that the swim meet experience was extremely beneficial. Exposure to competitive events is important in order to allow children to continue to swimming.
- The mentors wanted more time with their mentees, and this should also be taken into account for future programming.
- Also, the female mentor shared a weakness that was insightful; there was little diversity on the planning committee for the program. This also needs to be considered for future programming.

#### The Other Individuals—

- The swimming facility director and the afterschool care director were probably the most important parts of this program. They both were at the center of every segment of the program and it helped that they already knew each other. Again, this is something to consider for future programs.
- Both swimming facility director and the after-school care director had experienced discrimination early in their swimming careers. And they used this as motivation to make their lives and the program a success.
- Without the afterschool care director driving the children to the pool site, this program would not have taken place. Transportation is a significant problem for any kind of programming.
- The three program developers were energized by different reasons, but the double drownings brought them together to prevent more disheartening deaths.

- The success of the program was largely due to the variety of skills that each of the three program developers possessed. All barriers that arose during the implementation of the program were somehow overcome due to their unique abilities or knowledge of other individuals who assisted in the program's success.
- One person typically has to take the lead in community programming such as this, and Anthony Norris was cited often for being this essential individual. With future planning for programs, one person needs to be the "champion" in order to jump start the initiative and then drive it through tough spots.
- However, this "champion" cannot run the entire program him/herself. This key person needs to have "future champions" ready to take over when needed.
- Marketing and promoting the program and the swim meet was essential to the program's success. The children's hospital, Le Bonheur, was largely responsible for this, and these two business principles need to be included in future programming plans.

There were particular limitations to this program evaluation study. Sample size for the quantitative analysis, which was nominal, was not large enough for inferential statistical analyses. Therefore, only frequencies were employed. Also, the timeframe for the entire program and the analysis of the program was short; approximately seven weeks for the swim lessons and swim meet plus 13 weeks to complete qualitative interviews, focus groups and transcriptions. A more comprehensive research design with a control group of children would have been more exhaustive and reliable. Also, a longitudinal follow-up-plan would be logical to check these children for swimming ability and attitudes.

Although the number of participants was low and that the timeframe was short, the participants enhanced their swimming ability. Goals and objectives that guided the process were met and the sport of swimming was disseminated to children who had limited previous exposure. In the final analysis, after analyzing all data derived from the Make a Splash "Learn to Swim" pilot program, the results undoubtedly show that this innovative initiative was effective.

### **And the Future**

Since the pilot program was launched in February of 2009, the official MSMS "Learn to Swim" program has been in operation in the Memphis area. All subsequent sessions of this program have been

monitored and evaluated by the research team from the University of Memphis. Using program participant numbers, swim ability enhancement, as well as focus group interviews to gain deeper insights, results continue to confirm that this program is relevant and effective. These program evaluations have been essential to making the “Learn to Swim” program even better, and to the sponsors who expect data to convey if their return on investment is financially and socially relevant to their mission.

**The Make a Splash Mid-South “Learn to Swim” Program- 2009-2010.** Over the summer of 2009, efforts were ramped up to take the pilot program to full program status. More donors were recruited as were non-swimmers. Efforts were made to recruit children from the area school districts and local private/charter schools for free swim lessons. An additional pool was added to the program facilities (Hickory Hill Community Center) and the newly registered children could swim at either a north Memphis area pool (Bickford CC) or at a south Memphis facility (Hickory Hill CC). The second annual “I Have a Dream... Diversity in Swimming Day” developmental swim meet took place again at the U of M pool with a much larger contingent from the MSMS program. Two Olympian swimmers from the Memphis area, Gil Stovall and Julia Stowers, were among the invited guests along with a representative from USA Swimming, and the Mayor of the City of Memphis. Along with these dignitaries were the mascots from the U of M, Pouncer, and the local ice hockey team, who at the end of the event, actually got into the water and swam against each other. Of course, Pouncer, the U of M mascot, won and congratulated his opponent as a sign of good sportsmanship. The event was a celebratory way to end the MSMS “Learn to Swim” program.

***Attendance Numbers.*** There were a total of 250 participants starting and 200 completing the 2009-2010 MSMS “Learn to Swim” program. Also, approximately 150 of the total program participants were able to take part in the second annual “I Have a Dream... Diversity in Swimming Day” swim meet. These

numbers compare to the 2009 MSMS “Learn to Swim” pilot program of 12 of which six participated in the first “I Have a Dream... Diversity in Swimming Weekend” swim meet.

**Swimming Ability.** A small, random group of program participants’ (n=17) swimming ability, both pre and post intervention, was officially recorded by their swimming instructors. These numbers plus the specific demographic characteristics were reported to research team members by the directors of each pool site. Interpretation of quantitative results from this small group should be with discretion and are meaningful only for this particular group of children during this program. Of the 17, there were 10 males and seven females, with 14 participants reporting their racial identity as African American and three indicating they were Hispanic/Latino. Age range in years for these participants was 5-12 with the average age of 8.6 years. Seven participants were based at the Bickford Community Center pool and 10 were a part of the program at the Hickory Hill Community Center. Almost all reported they qualified for the “free” federal lunch program at school (16) with one indicating a “no” lunch program status. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, a typical household of four during the 2009-2010 school-year that would qualify for the “free” lunch status would have a household income of less than \$28,665, while “reduced” lunch status parameters were \$28,666-\$40,793 (USDHHS, 2010).

The 2009-2010 MSMS “Learn to Swim” program research participants’ swimming ability, both pre and post-intervention, can be found in Table 4. Swimming instructors verified the results and used the American Red Cross swimming skills checklists and levels. These numbers along with the confirmation from the instructors demonstrate that the program was effective with enhancing swimming ability of the research participants. Each individual swimmer achieved at least one level higher post intervention while four program swimmers improved from Level I to Level V. The only person to swim at Level VI at pre and post-intervention was a swimmer who was considering lifeguard training as the next step, and trying to improve specific swimming strokes.

Table 4. Swimming ability results for the 2009-2010 MSMS “Learn to Swim” program

	N
<u>Swimming Ability (Pre-Intervention)</u>	
Level I	14
Level II	2
Level III	0
Level IV	0
Level V	0
Level VI	1
<u>Swimming Ability (Post-Intervention)</u>	
Level I	0
Level II	4
Level III	2
Level IV	4
Level V	6
Level VI	1

Level I-Introduction to Water Skills-enter/exit water; blow bubbles; open eyes under water; basic water safety rules  
 Level II-Fundamental Aquatic Skills-enter water by stepping/jumping from side; hold breath under water; bobbing; front/back float/glide; treading water; more water safety rules  
 Level III-Stroke Development-headfirst entry tuck position; bobbing and moving to safety; rotary breathing; survival float; push off with flutter and dolphin kicks; front crawl/elem. backstroke; more water safety rules  
 Level IV-Stroke Improvement-headfirst entry stride position; swim underwater; survival swimming; tread water using 2 kicks; front/back crawl, elem. backstroke, breaststroke, sidestroke, and butterfly; more water safety rules  
 Level V-Stroke Refinement-shallow-angle dive from side to glide; front flip turns; refine all strokes; more water safety rules  
 Level VI-Swimming and Skill Proficiency-refinement of all strokes/dives to perform with ease, efficiency, power over greater distances

**Focus Group Interviews.** Analysis of only the swimmers and parent/caregivers’ perspectives of the program was achieved through formal interviews using either focus group or one-on-one arrangements. The same research team member, who also accomplished the pilot study qualitative data collection, was lead interviewer for this study as well. Additionally, she completed all transcriptions of these discussions.

Children were interviewed together in a focus group setting at the pool facility where they experienced the program. There were a total of seven youth participants interviewed (five at HHCC & two at BCC) ranging in age from seven to 17 years. Within the results, each child was given a pseudonym

in order to comply with anonymity requirements for qualitative research methods. The pseudonym (initial), age, gender, and the community center at which they received the program are listed below:

- Clea (C)- 13 years-female-HHCC
- Gerald (G)- 7 years-male-BCC
- Krystal (K)- 13 years-female-HHCC
- Lamarcus (L)- 12 years-male-BCC
- Manny (M)- 9 years-male-HHCC
- Nadia (N)- 11 years-female-HHCC
- Sariah (S)- 17 years-female-HHCC

Many of the responses from this first full-year program group matched the ones from the pilot group.

The first major purpose for the 2009-2010 MSMS “Learn to Swim” program was to enhance swimming ability, which the children were able to describe. Krystal responded, *“I was not a good swimmer at all, at all. And Lamarcus added, “I didn’t swim that good, but I knew how to swim. I could drown.”* However, the group then was asked to describe their ability to swim after the MSMS “Learn to Swim” program in their own words, to which Krystal replied, *“Now I can do everything. I can swim and breathe under water.”* And Lamarcus answered, *“I can swim 95 out of a 100. The things that I can do well are like free style and stuff like that.”* Finally, Gerald who was only 7 years old confidently inserted, *“Excellent!”* Additionally, the participants were asked if they had planned to go swimming in the near future, and if they would swim more often now that they knew how to swim at a higher level. All immediately responded that they would swim more frequently, and Clea added, *“Well Saturday I’m actually going with my friend swimming somewhere.”*

The children were also asked to talk about their experiences with the second annual “I Have a Dream... Diversity in Swimming Day” developmental swim meet. Not all of the focus group participants participated in this event, but most had taken part. Their specific experiences indicated that it was an enjoyable event and that they learned a lot about competitive swimming. Participants remembered receiving t-shirts and they also recalled that Diversity staff members from USA Swimming were in

attendance which impressed some of the focus group members. Sariah who was 17 years old and had been on swim teams before responded at length about the swim meet: *“They gave us t-shirts and we did practice laps on each stroke. It was a lot of people from USA Swimming. It was a lot of them! Even though we already know how to do our techniques, they were helping us on how we can go faster, how we can breathe better and all that before we did the swim meet. And then Gil Stovall, he came and spoke about the Olympics. The mayor spoke about it, did a little speech. They gave us little bags and stuff. We got our ribbons. Then I did the free competition thing then I did the breaststroke. I have a good timing in butterfly but the last time I did the competition with the butterfly I hurt my shoulder so they put me in the breast. The swim meet was the best!”*

Along with the experiences from swimming in the meet, we asked about the peer mentors to whom each child was assigned. This part of the program seemed especially successful as all children involved with the swim meet indicated they enjoyed having a mentor at such a new event. Again, Sariah, who was an experienced swimmer, responded with the fact that she had shaved off 10 seconds due to her peer mentor giving her a few technical modifications.

The children gave their input on their overall assessment of the diversity swim meet. They were all excited about this particular event, and some seemed to be willing to be a part of a competitive swimming team in the future. They noted that all received goodie bags and ribbons for participating, and many earned ribbons for placing in specific races during the developmental swim meet. At the end of the focus group interview, each child was given a chance to summarize their experience and offer any closing comments they thought would help with future programs. Insightful comments included how this program could reach more children through the use of social media and better advertising. Sariah noted, *“I think the biggest thing to do would be to use technology because most children are very good with technology, like Facebook. Because you know they have like the invitations, group invitations. People put it on Facebook, MySpace. Or televise it or something like that.”* And Krystal added, *“I would*

*think like flyers, like getting people to know more about it and like putting in like the newspaper. An ad in the newspaper for it, I think it will help."*

Also, the youth participants were openly honest about how some of their peers would be hesitant to learn how to swim because they would not want to admit that they did not know how to swim. The comments pointed to parental encouragement as a key factor to overcome these barriers. Krystal began this series of comments, *"I think the reason people or kids don't come here for swim lessons is because they're afraid that if their friends think they can't swim they're going to laugh at them and stuff like that."* Sariah followed up this comment with, *"Ego, I think that people aren't really participating in this or aren't really coming because of ego and pride."* After this comment, Clea added, *"Well I don't think they're scared for their reputation. I think they're scared they might drown. I mean like, some people when they get in the water they feel they're going to just drown and they can't overcome those feelings."*

A few of the focus group participants also noted a barrier for African American girls; how water and the chemicals in the water can negatively affect their hair. Sariah noted, *"It could also be the hair."* Krystal jumped into the conversation here and said, *"I have flat irons at home."* To which Sariah immediately replied, *"Or get braids. We had someone like that. She was kind of scared and said, 'I don't want to get my hair wet' and all that stuff so I think it's more older children. And that is just an excuse."*

The children discussed how parents can help to overcome these issues through the use of encouragement. They repeatedly responded that parents needed to overcome their fears to help their children learn how to swim. Krystal summed it up best, *"But if parents tell their kids like you should do this, it will help."*

Two parent/caregiver focus group interview sessions were scheduled and completed. Four parent/caregivers, all African American, were interviewed at HHCC and one parent at BCC. The HHCC parent/caregivers were either mothers or an older sister of children in the program; one had daughters

who were 16 and 17 years old and excellent swimmers (Sally), another had a 12 year old daughter who was just learning how to swim (Celie), and the third HHCC participant was an older sister of a middle school-aged female participant who also was just learning how to swim (Fonda). The BCC parent/caregiver was the mother of two participants, 7 and 12 year old males, who did not know how to swim before the program (Lynn).

The parent/caregivers were asked about the children's swimming ability. Most of the children did not have high level aquatic skills nor did they have experience with qualified swimming lessons or instructors. A few discussed swimming lessons that were taken by their children during summer camps, but felt as though these experiences were not enough to become competent swimmers. Celie described her daughter's ability to swim prior to the program: *"(My daughter) couldn't swim. In fact, she had fear of the water. But, after the program, she is a little more confident. This summer, we will do lessons somewhere for both her and my son. She can tread water pretty good."* Also, Fonda answered in typical fashion and added that her sister was no longer fearful, *"(My sister), she's gotten pretty good with water. She use to just stand in water but now she'll put her head under the water. I know she's not scared to get in the water anymore."*

When asked about the swim instructors' ability to teach their children how to swim, all adult participants responded with good comments. Lynn, who had two older sons who learned how to swim during the program, discussed her youngest child, and said, *"I'm so proud of my baby! He's swimming now (laughter). I didn't think he was going to be able to do it. I told Chris (MSMS swimming instructor) it's going to be a LONG time teaching him how to swim. And he can swim now! I am so excited. Yes Chris did a good job! Because when my son first started, you know, by him being shy, he wasn't comfortable with Chris at first. He just looked at him, and he was scared. He wouldn't let go of the rails or anything. But now, he tries to swim in the deep part. He does real good!"* Sally was happy with the instructors, but

also noted the need for more, *“I think the instructors, the lifeguards are real patient and do good but it’s just the fact of the limited amount of time.”* And Celie also responded to the lack of time by adding a possible solution: *“She’s a little bit more knowledgeable but like I said, they didn’t master anything but you know just the basic strokes. She needs more time in the water on a more consistent basis. The program was not long enough. I wish it could have been long enough at more locations. But I think it’s good. I think the program should be implemented through the school systems through the city however the children before some age should have some kind of basic swimming skills...it should be required. I think we’ll see less drowning. Like if a program was implemented so we wouldn’t have as many.”*

The adult focus group participants had a chance to talk about this issue; to converse about the high minority youth fatal and non-fatal drowning rates. They were able to verbalize their feelings about this deadly and tragic situation, and their comments were enlightening. Discussion also touched on how the parent/caregivers felt about their fear of drowning and water, which was unanimous. And some of this fear was driven by personal experiences with drowning. Celie also discussed the racial disparity found with swimming and what might be the cause: *“We hear it all the time and I don’t know what it is but Caucasians, they just seem swim more. Oriental children they swim more. I think it may be the facility issues. Maybe they have more facilities. Our children don’t. Sometimes it may be a generation thing where the parents didn’t swim so they just don’t but, yeah, I was very aware of it.”* Sally added that it might not be racial, but economic, and said, *“Or they can’t pay for the lessons so that’s a big problem.”* Lynn brought a real life experience to the discussion about minority children and drowning, and noted, *“Yes, that’s what really made me want to want them to learn how to swim. Because usually when we go swimming, I’m the one that’s in saying, “Don’t go all the way out there!” because I knew they couldn’t swim good. And I can’t swim so, that wouldn’t help. And my momma, her neighbor; it’s been about two three years ago. He drowned. They broke into a pool, he jumped in and he drowned. He thought he could swim, but he went into one of the deep parts and he couldn’t swim. He was a friend of my older son.”*

All adult focus group participants agreed regarding their initial impressions of the program. The parent/caregivers were excited about the fact that the children would learn how to swim, and were pleased that the instructors were so patient and effective. Also, the group was asked about how they became aware of the program, and many of the responses indicated awareness emerged from word of mouth. Celie discussed how she found out about the MSMS program from a church friend, and Fonda became aware of the program through her mother's friend. Fonda admitted that she had doubts that the program was legitimate and would be effective: *"I thought at first, 'How are they going to teach them to swim in (just) two weeks?'"* And Celie continued with this thought by saying, *"Well, I did want my daughter to overcome her fear and I felt that was something that may happen during the time. Like I said I was a little apprehensive about the time frame but I knew it couldn't hurt."*

Overall, the parent/caregivers gave their glowing approval for the program and its effectiveness. Lynn's comments were characteristic of what the group said: *"I loved it. I love it, I wish I would have knew before now. It's a great experience for them. Because my kids they usually start things and not complete them but this is something that they really, really enjoy doing. Best part of the program is that they can swim now. (Laughter) They can swim now!"*

The next set of questions explored how the MSMS "Learn to Swim" program would work in their neighborhoods or other neighborhoods in Memphis. All agreed that this program would be a valuable initiative, but there would be some obstacles. One such obstacle is that African Americans perceive swimming as not "one of their sports," and focus on other sports, such as football and basketball. Further, the group discussed a lack of African American world class swimmers who would be important role models for other African American children. And the parent/caregivers also gave advice on how to better publicize the program. Celie offered up one solution that involved the schools: *"Implement it through the schools. They come to get them for football. They come and get them for basketball, for*

*track and field and everything else. Even if a school doesn't have a pool, there's a community center or something close by to that neighborhood."*

When asked about what they thought could have been improved with the program, there was just one comment about how the program would have better, with which the rest of the parents agreed. Lynn responded, *"No, there was nothing I didn't like. Nothing! Well, the only thing, if it extends longer, like I said, during the summer. I'm going to be honest. More parents need to know about it because it's good, especially for the smaller kids."*

The parents/caregivers all agreed that their children improved their swimming skills because of the program. One comment included a noted barrier to swimming especially with African Americans which is the fear of possible injury and/or drowning. However, this particular issue was overcome due to the program. Celie recalled her daughter's experiences, *"She can freestyle and she's a lot more confident putting her head under water and swimming under water, which before you couldn't get her to put her face in the water."* All the children's confidence in the water was enhanced, and also may have initiated one parent's interest in taking her own swimming lessons. Lynn noted, *"I'm not as scared now. Actually the coach, he's constantly trying to get me in the water. And I think I might actually give it a shot. I really need to."* And Sally added that her daughter was going to another level with her swimming: *"The lessons gave my oldest you know, because she's heavy so it gave her a lot of more confidence in herself. Because she has excelled on to finish the lifeguard test. So she can take that on to college and get a job in college doing lifeguarding."*

The parent/caregivers were also asked about the second annual "I Have a Dream... Diversity Swim Day" developmental swim meet, which only one parent, Sally, had experienced. She was extremely positive about the swim meet and indicated her children had a great experience. Sally also was able to remember specifics about the day: *"It was held at Memphis State (University of Memphis). She did the breaststroke and she won a first place in one of the competitions. The guy who won the*

*Olympics (Gil Stovall) was there. He was a speaker. I think she said our mayor was there. But she was very interested and excited when she got home. She got a picture with the Olympic guy. She was curious and she was a little scared because it's Memphis State. She really enjoyed herself and felt real good."*

After the initial complete year of the MSMS "Learn to Swim" program, results concluded that the program was an overwhelmingly effective method to teach disenfranchised children how to swim and how to be safe in and around water. Very much like the pilot program, the first full-fledged initiative gave indications that it was a unique, pioneering community-based program, and that it should continue to expand. This special program that started as a "call to action" was growing into a resourceful solution to a leading cause of death; the public health problem of fatal and non-fatal drowning. Additionally, it was a direct pathway to infusing diversity into the sport of swimming, which could only help to enhance vocational opportunities in the aquatic industry (i.e., lifeguards, swimming instructors, swim team coaches, pool facility directors, etc.). The increase in self-confidence alone was a bright and shining product for the participating children in this little swimming program. And at the end of the first full year, research outcomes revealed that the considerable viability of the *Make a Splash Mid-South* "Learn to Swim" program was significantly valuable to the Memphis community.

## Chapter Six

### How to Establish a “Learn to Swim” Program in Your Community

Swimming is unique. There is no other sport or exercise option like it. The complexities of this physical activity can be examined better by using the Swimming Matrix (Figure 4), which visually describes this atypical activity, and sorts out associated components. This matrix may assist future program developers to help persuade decision-makers by better illustrating the special features involved with swimming. Most of society believes that swimming is a playful, fun-time activity, and that swimming competence is really not required to succeed in life. However, it is more than that because swimming often involves life and death situations. And because of this, swimming becomes part of the overall well-being of a community, physical, emotional, and economic. So, swimming is more than splashing around in the shallow end on a hot day.

**Figure 4- The Swimming Matrix**



Yes, swimming is a fun-filled, recreational pursuit, but it is also a highly recommended fitness activity that most of society can participate in for the lifespan. Swimming, along with other water-based exercise activities (water aerobics, for example), are physical activity options that are medically prescribed for various conditions. One major benefit that swimming can provide is that it is a full-body activity which puts less stress on joints. And, swimming is an activity that is beneficial, and many times necessary, for water sports (i.e., boating, water skiing, fishing, etc.). Further, swimming is globally popular and is a leisure-time interest for many individuals whether on vacation or just during the summer to escape the heat.

Swimming is also a high profile, competitive sport with over 300,000 young athletes involved in USA Swimming sanctioned club teams across the US. There are school-sponsored swimming teams and water polo teams in middle schools and high schools across country. The Olympic swimming team is considered one of the premier teams during the Summer Olympics and the swimming race events are typically programmed on television during prime time as they are popular and achieve high ratings. Other swimming sport categories, such as synchronized swimming and water polo, are also Olympic events. And of course there are kayak and crew teams as well as triathlon events that all involve athletes who need to be competent swimmers.

Due to the fact that swimming is such a sizeable economic reality in our society, the aquatic industry is extensive and offers numerous vocational opportunities. Competent swimmers can obtain certifications to be a lifeguard and swimming instructor. Coaching and managing swim teams are viable career possibilities. Additionally, managing pool facilities and other aquatic industry options (i.e., YMCAs, American Red Cross, pool maintenance careers, etc.) are burgeoning livelihoods.

But... there is the drowning issue. Knowing how to swim can save lives. And it is an activity that you might not think that you will ever need, until you are in that situation. Because of this public health construct, swimming is a life skill that everyone should be exposed to and be able learn. Understand that even the most competent swimmer can drown if impaired or swimming in open, dangerous waters. But research has shown that swimming skill is considered to be a protective agent against drowning (Brenner, et al., 2009). Unfortunately, minority children drown at high rates, and research has also shown that children who are racially underrepresented and disadvantaged economically have low or no swimming competence (Irwin, Drayer, Irwin, Ryan, & Southall, 2008).

Because of the specific public health issues and the complexity of the activity, swimming is different and programming that help to affect this issue should be specially designed as well. The following section is based on the experiences from the *Make a Splash Mid-South* “Learn to Swim” program which was, and still is, based in Memphis, TN (presently under a new name;- *Splash Mid-South*). Your community may be different and have various issues that Memphis did not have. But, sadly, every community faces the tragedy of drowning, and this is our way of paying forward with the hope of decreasing, and possibly eliminating, fatal and non-fatal drowning in all communities.

### **Getting Started**

1. **Build a coalition** of passionate, resourceful social change agents. Coalition members should represent the education and medical communities; local aquatic professionals; and, perhaps most important, involved individuals from the underserved population.
  - a. **Education and medical community representatives** are critical to the 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. Similarly, these coalition members provide grant writing and research skills critical to securing program financing as well as access to and/or delivery of water safety education/outreach through the local public school physical or health education programs. Having representations from Safe Kids Mid-South, which was a



a hub for resources of value to the media as well as community at-large. The website should contain a program overview and updates, photos, research specific to the local program as well as links to national studies, aquatic sources such as USA Swimming, and coalition member information. And don't forget to include social media in your plan as more are attending to this source of information. Finally, make sure to get parent permission to use any pictures/videos of their children as you will want to use these "swimming kids" pictures in your media releases and website. This is easily accomplished when each parent/caregiver registers their child for the program.

4. **Evaluate regularly** using a variety of research methods to monitor participant progress, attrition, attitudes and behaviors. Employing a data driven approach is fundamental to securing general community support, media interest, grant funding, and overall program credibility. Including a local institution of higher learning is suggested (see #1). Researchers from departments on these campuses, such as the School of Public Health, College of Education, and the social science areas, are recommended to approach first when planning the program evaluation.
5. **Develop a budget** that is structured with some flexibility. The MSMS started small with their pilot study to limit large expenses. However, don't skimp on the research. The MSMS research plan for the pilot program was important to the eventual larger full-year program as they had authentic data to show future donors. Every child in the pilot program received a swim suit, a towel, and goggles. These swim equipment items may not be necessary to every program. Therefore, set your budget to reflect your program.
6. **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 YMCA's, community recreation centers, for-profit health clubs, public school pools, apartment complexes, among others. Additionally, alliances should be sought with community partners who can assist with reducing, if not eliminating, economic and access barriers such as membership fees, equipment, and transportation.

### **Last Word...**

The *Make a Splash Mid-South* "Learn to Swim" pilot program and subsequent MSMS "Learn to Swim" programs have achieved what all individuals and groups involved set out to do. The program lives on and the research continues. The "call to action" was set in motion using a systematic, grass-roots approach with people who cared; cared about Memphis and cared about the most valuable part of our

community- the children of Memphis. Our ambitious and hopeful goal with this monograph is that you will use what you have read and shape your programming to best fit your community. It is our dream that your community will build a brilliant cohesive alliance of dedicated and concerned citizens, very much like the *Make a Splash Mid-South*, whose main mission will be to teach your children to swim.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to acknowledge the **Benjamin L. Hooks Institute for Social Change at the University of Memphis** for their foresight concerning the need for this research, and then their subsequent support of the research.

Also, we would like to thank and recognize the qualitative expertise of **Dr. Paul Wright**, who developed the focus group interview protocols, and **Ms. Evelyn Okunbor** who so skillfully administered all the focus groups and interviews found within this monograph.

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## Supplementary Resources

Diversity in Aquatics—

<http://www.diversityinaquatics.com/>

International Journal of Aquatic Research and Education—

<http://journals.humankinetics.com/IJARE>

Splash Mid-South— (previously Make a Splash Mid-South)

<http://www.splashmidsouth.org/>

National Drowning Prevention Alliance—

<http://ndpa.org/home/>

National Swimming Pool Foundation—

<http://www.nspf.org/en/home.aspx>

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<http://www.safekids.org/worldwide/>

USA Swimming—

<http://www.usaswimming.org/DesktopDefault.aspx>

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