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Pools of courage

Through a unique Mid-South program that may help to save lives, U of M faculty, alumni and students make a splash in the community.

By Sara Hoover

As the daughter of a garbage man who marched with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during the 1968 Memphis sanitation workers' strike, Dr. Rosie Phillips Bingham knows about seeing adversity overcome.

When Bingham was 10 years old, she was interested in learning to swim and went to a public pool for lessons. But the native Memphian was turned away during the segregated time. Shortly thereafter, the city didn't want to integrate the public pools and instead closed them for the next six years.

"Being a typical 16-year-old, I thought I was too old to learn to swim, so I never learned, and in many ways it's always haunted me and helped me have a fear of the water," says Bingham, U of M vice president for Student Affairs.

But she wasn't going to let it be a generational cycle.

"It motivated me to make sure that never happened to my son. He was in the pool by 2 years old because I was not going to let happen to his life the same thing that happened to my life."

That's the mindset of Make A Splash Mid-South as well, a coalition of aquatic and service organizations focused on at-risk children, spearheaded by Safe Kids at Le Bonheur Children's Hospital, City of Memphis Park Services and Memphis Tiger Swimming (MTS), the competitive swim club at the U of M. Their mission is swim education, fundraising and awareness.



An MTS parent, Hooks Institute Director Daphene McFerren, U of M Student Affairs Vice President Rosie Phillips Bingham and U of M Professor Carol Irwin, lead investigator of the national swim study.

The program began in summer 2008 in response to several events. First, the tragic drowning of two African-American teenagers in Memphis city pools on opening day occurred. Second, a U of M national study revealed that 60 percent of African-American and Hispanic children don't know how to swim and are three times more likely to drown than the national average.

Susan A. Helms, U of M alumna (BPS '88, MALS '04) and director of Safe Kids, formed

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See a video on the Make a Splash Mid-South program.

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the group from a water safety meeting. The registered nurse decided to use USA Swimming's existing anti-drowning campaign Make a Splash, and focus on education and events, particularly in diverse neighborhoods.

"Make a Splash Mid-South is an effort to bring awareness to swim education and to raise money to run free or low-cost swim lessons that at-risk kids can easily get to," says Dr. Jim Whelan (PhD '89), U of M associate professor of psychology and board president of the Tiger swim club. "The common mission is how to ensure the safety and well-being of children of color."

To that end, the group piloted free swim lessons and held Diversity in Swimming events the past two years.

Anthony Norris, board member of Memphis Tiger Swimming and of the U of M's Benjamin Hooks Institute for Social Change, coordinated the events and organized free swim classes. Lessons were held at Bickford Aquatic Center for eight weeks. More than 100 children participated at Bickford, and lessons continue to be offered.

The "I Have a Dream ... Diversity in Swimming" event, held the past two years at the U of M Student Recreation and Fitness Center, includes a swim clinic and developmental swim meet for new and beginning swimmers. A competitive meet was also held the first year. Eighty volunteers and 200 swimmers — including 80 brand-new ones — participated.



Youngsters get swim lessons at the second annual clinic and developmental meet held this past March.

"Last year, we were really ambitious. We held a competitive portion," says Norris. "This year, we're just focusing on the swim clinic and the Future Champions developmental meet. We want to raise funds to provide swim lessons for hundreds, if not thousands, of children throughout next year. Also, we want to instill a desire in our new swimmers to continue, and we also want to promote water safety and the importance of quality swim instruction particularly in the minority community where they're more at-risk."

In addition, scholarships, partially funded by the Hooks Institute, were given to two individuals to join the Tiger swim club.

David Han, aquatics manager with the Memphis Park Services, trains 20 high school students to improve their swimming and become lifeguard

candidates. The free, weekly lessons are with students ages 16 to 18.

"I have two goals: have them swim more efficiently and participate in the Diversity Swim Meet, and become lifeguard certified to get job opportunities with the city," says Han, a professional swimmer in China at age 15, former college coach and consultant with the U.S. Olympic team at the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

The catalyst for these different programs was the national research swim study, led by Drs. Carol and Dick Irwin, assistant professor and professor respectively in the health and sport sciences department at the U of M.

USA Swimming commissioned the U of M to conduct the research. Begun in January 2008, the team surveyed 1,772 children ages 6 to 16 years old in six cities: Memphis, Miami, Chicago, Philadelphia, Houston and Oakland.

"We worked with non-swimming programs only to gather data," says Carol Irwin. "We used the YMCA's programs to access kids."

The results were disseminated in April 2008 and gained national attention, being picked up by HBO, *The Today Show*, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*.

"I had no idea that some of the data had never been captured before," says Irwin. "I was surprised that no one had actually studied minority swimming ability levels. There's only one other study that has measured racial identity groups and their swimming ability and it's on adults. Not surprisingly, our results matched. That was in 1994. Not much has happened (since)."

The team is currently conducting phase two in different cities, with Memphis being a site again. That data will be announced Memorial Day weekend.

The study found that children from non-swimming households were eight times more likely to drown, meaning those coming from generations of non-swimmers are more at-risk. The origins might be traced back to segregation.



Participants take a break during the Diversity in Swimming Day at the U of M Recreation Center. The U of M swim study showed 60 percent of African American and Hispanic children don't know how to swim.

"There is a book, *Contested Waters: Social History in Swimming Pools in America*," says Irwin. "Back in the 1800s, everyone used to swim together, all the males. Then, once women were allowed, a division happened that was racial and economic, but more racial. This book definitely documented that society prohibited African-American, Hispanic and Native American groups from municipal pools."

Whatever the origins may be, efforts like the study and Make A Splash Mid- South are raising awareness.

"It was obvious there was a disparity, but that the majority of African-American children can't swim was shocking," says Norris, who learned to swim as an adult. "Of course, that made them more at risk of drowning and missing out on the opportunities they could have by learning to swim and also swimming on a competitive level. I've realized the importance of getting children involved earlier. My daughter at age 3 fell in love with it. So I experienced firsthand the impact and how it's just had such a positive effect on my children and our family.

"I just really want to spread that opportunity to so many children, especially in the African-American community. There's a lot of untapped resources and potential in children who really love it and have great desire and determination. If we can provide support, then there's unlimited potential."

Make A Splash Mid-South plans to build on the momentum with another diversity event in the fall. They also hope to partner with the U of M Recreation Center to offer swim education and spread the message that free lessons are available year-round.

This year's event also launched Olympic swimmer and Memphis Tiger Swimming alumnus Gil Stovall's citywide swim program that will be a division of Make A Splash. Approved by Memphis Mayor A C Wharton's office, it will provide free swim lessons for kids this summer with Stovall, who competed in the Beijing Olympics in 2008, and who plans to become a U of M student this fall.

Bingham, who served as a celebrity timer at the inaugural event, found it fun and inspirational.

"It seemed like an event that boosts self-esteem because some of these students had just learned to swim and to be in a competition like that, I thought was pretty inspirational. I loved that they tried. All of those things that make us feel good about an event and about change happened at that meet."

At the U of M for 25 years, Bingham has taken a few swimming lessons as an adult.

"I did enough to be able to swim. But I still have a phobia about it. That's what's so debilitating. I would rather that children never got there in the first place," she says. "Some people will look and say I'm brave, but it's not. It's going on in spite of your fear. You could be shaking in your boots, but your life will be so much richer if you just go on anyway. There's no shame in being afraid. Fear is a worthwhile emotion; it's protective. It's when you allow it to be debilitating that you allow it to be problematic. Kids who are afraid of the water, get in the water. If you can't put your whole body in the water — and I actually have a fear but I get in anyway — do the smallest amount you can do."

Many from the U of M community are helping others literally and figuratively put their toe in the water for the very first time.

[See a video](#) on the Make a Splash Mid-South program.

