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## EDUCATION

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# What African Americans Can Do to Bridge the Swimming Gap: A Call to Action

Steven Waller and Dawn M. Norwood

Over the last ten years, the gap in swimming participation between Whites and other minority groups has been well documented. Moreover, the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural constraints to swimming participation by African Americans have been clearly delineated. With the challenges surrounding the minority swimming gap acknowledged, the impetus should now be on creating strategies to rectify the problem. This paper argues for a collective effort on the part of the African American community to ameliorate the swimming gap, thus lessening the senseless deaths associated with it. In the paper, strategic actions are outlined including advocacy and the creation of viable partnerships to bridge the swimming gap. Most notably, the authors applaud the efforts of African American swimming luminaries such as Cullen Jones and many others who continue to articulate the importance and urgency of African Americans learning to swim but surmise that they cannot do the “heavy lifting” by themselves to encourage and inspire African Americans to learn to swim. Organizations such as the National Urban League (NUL), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Congressional Black Caucus and media moguls such as Oprah Winfrey, Tyler Perry, and Mo’Nique are encouraged to join forces with the NUL and NAACP in developing a broad-based initiative to promote learning to swim. In summary, the authors argue that the African American community must play a significant role in developing solutions to curb drownings and close the swimming gap.

**Keywords:** African American, swimming, collaboration, call to action

Not too long ago, late night television pundit Jimmy Kimmel addressed the swimming challenge that confronts many African Americans. After his lively introduction, he began a rather interesting conversation about African Americans and swimming, citing a recently released study conducted by faculty (Irwin et al., 2009) in the department of Human and Sport Sciences at the University of Memphis. Kimmel went on to state,

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They did a study at the University of Memphis that concluded almost 60% of African American children cannot swim, which is twice as many as White kids. Now why this is true, I don't know so I've paid a visit to my friends in Legends Barber Shop here in LA to see if they might know and if maybe, together, we can't turn this trend around. (Hark.com, 2009)

After watching and listening to Kimmel's off-brand type of humor, the complexity of this pressing problem, particularly through the cultural lens of an African American, became clearer. Over the span of approximately ten minutes, I vacillated between rolling out of bed with laughter and becoming overly-agitated at how the African American men featured in the barbershop interview responded. The majority of them made light of the pervasive problem of African Americans not knowing how to swim: funny, but not so funny in the grand scheme of things. The humor does not negate the fact that African American youth drown at a disproportionate rate compared with Whites.

A few weeks later, the sports journalism show *Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel* reported on the same story in a segment entitled *The Swim Gap*. This exposé focused on the efforts of Olympic gold medalist Cullen Jones, who has undertaken the herculean task of trying to correct the disparities in African American participation in swimming.

Finally, comedian Chris Rock's summer 2009 release *Good Hair* provided a cultural capstone to the discussion about Black hair and swimming. When Rock's daughter, Lola, came up to him crying and asked, "Daddy, how come I don't have good hair?" the bewildered comic committed himself to search the ends of the earth and the depths of Black culture to find out who had put that question into his little girl's head. *Good Hair*, is a wonderfully insightful and entertaining, yet remarkably serious, documentary about African American hair culture. An exposé of comic proportions that only Chris Rock could pull off, the crew of *Good Hair* visits hair salons and styling battles, scientific laboratories, and Indian temples to explore the way Black hairstyles impact the leisure activities, wallets, pocketbooks, sexual relationships, and self-esteem of Black people. Celebrities such as Ice-T, Kerry Washington, Nia Long, Paul Mooney, Raven Symoné, Maya Angelou, and Reverend Al Sharpton all candidly offer their stories and observations to Rock while he struggles with the task of figuring out how to respond to his daughter's question. Rock gets to the hair and swimming question by asking what it may be like to be a Black megastar and have a Beverly Hills swimming pool but you don't dare swim in for fear of undoing the time spent at the beautician's. What he discovers is that Black hair is a big business that doesn't always benefit the Black community and little Lola's question might well be bigger than his ability to convince her that her head is nowhere near as important as what is inside.

Overall, what troubled me the most about all the sound-bites was that no one rendered a solution to how we can collectively and strategically resolve this pervasive problem. Perhaps more significant was after the well publicized findings of the Irwin et al. study (2009), the millions of viewers that saw the Jimmy Kimmel episode, the immaculate reporting of the *Real Sports*, and the quasi-serious inquiry into the complexities of women and Black hair by *Good Hair*; the questions of what will the African American community do to help resolve this problem never surfaced.

This article serves as a continuation of discourse related to how the community of concerned aquatics professionals, administrators, researchers and educators, organizations that advocate for swimming, and public health officials can begin to rectify the swimming gap. Withstanding the pervasiveness of the drowning problem and vastness of the swimming gap between African Americans and Whites, the focal point of this essay is on what the African American community can do to continue the efforts to combat the drowning and the instruction gap that adversely impacts African American children and youth. For the purposes of this essay, the terms “African American” and “Black” are treated as being synonymous. Both are used to describe those Americans that self report as being of African descent but born in the United States. The terms “African American community” or “Black community” is used to define African Americans that may share the same cultural, geographic, educational, economic, religious/spiritual, and political values.

## **What We Know—The Story the Data Tells Us**

More than a decade of good interdisciplinary scholarship has helped to tell the dismal story of how racial/ethnic minorities continue to lag behind Whites in water sports in the United States. In contemporary society, the sport participation of young African American athletes has been concentrated in a limited range of sports such as basketball, baseball, boxing, football, and track and field events (Coakley, 2007; Wiggins, 1989). In contrast, African Americans are vastly underrepresented in water sports such as swimming, diving, water polo, rowing, and sailing at the scholastic, collegiate, and professional levels (Hodge, Harrison, Burden, & Dixon, 2008).

Scholars such as Smith (2009) bring forth the sociocultural argument that African American youth opt out of water sports because they simply do not pay; there is little or no market value to them. This fact unto itself partially accounts for the participation disparity. Smith further argues,

Even if African Americans were allowed into the swimming pools, if one can only afford to swim at a public pool, one is unlikely to develop the swimming skills that will pay off in high school or college. Furthermore, swimming doesn't pay, except at Olympic levels, and even at that level, the pay is not like that associated with other sports like football and basketball. (p. 27)

## **Drowning Incidents**

Drowning rates were one of the focal points for giving meaning to the swimming gap problem. The alarm sounded when statistics such as the following were reported to the mass media: (a) nearly 60% of African-American children cannot swim, almost twice the figure for white children; (b) Black children drown at a rate almost three times the overall rate; (c) less than 2% of USA Swimming's nearly 252,000 members who swim competitively year-round are Black (USA Swimming Foundation, 2009). Furthermore, when USA Swimming commissioned the landmark study conducted by the University of Memphis' Department of Health and Sports Sciences, the interest in the swimming gap took on new life. After implementing the nationwide study that surveyed 1,772 children aged 6–16 in six

cities—two-thirds of them Black or Hispanic — to gauge what factors contributed most to the minority swimming gap, Irwin et al. reported the following key finds: (a) 31% of the White respondents could not swim safely, compared with 58% of the Blacks; (b) the nonswimming rate for Hispanic children was almost as high — 56% — although more than twice as many Hispanics as Blacks are now USA Swimming members; (c) the influence of parents' attitudes and abilities (Irwin et al., 2008). Moreover, Irwin et al. discovered that if a parent could not swim, as was far more likely in minority families than White families, or if the parent felt swimming was dangerous, then the child was far less likely to learn how to swim (Irwin et al., 2008). In addition, this study highlighted the strategic importance of outreach efforts for learn-to-swim programs in minority communities target parents (Associated Press, 2008).

Saluja and colleagues (2006) also analyzed drowning data and found a disparity in both swimming abilities and drownings between Whites and other minorities. Black non-Hispanic males had higher swimming pool drowning rates compared with White non-Hispanic males of comparable age, with risk ratios ranging from 5.5 to 12.1. Although the same patterns were seen among females, rates and rate ratios were lower. Hispanic males had higher rates of pool drownings compared with White non-Hispanic males, but they had lower rates compared with Black non-Hispanic males of comparable age. The drowning rates among Hispanic females were similar to those of White non-Hispanic females.

The distribution of locations where victims drowned varied by race/ethnicity. More Black non-Hispanic victims drowned in public pools (51%) compared with White non-Hispanic (25%) and Hispanic victims (23%). The majority of drownings among Black non-Hispanic victims occurred in hotel/motel pools.

Similarly, Hastings, Zahran, and Cable (2006) also analyzed drowning rates among youth across racial and ethnic groups. The researchers concluded that age, sex, and racial differentials in swimming participation are conditioned by the availability of instructional and competitive programs and the principle of social exclusivity that limits access even where a swimming infrastructure is available.

Irwin et al. (2010) conducted a follow-up study to their groundbreaking 2008 study. The 2010 study paints a rather dismal picture for African Americans and other minorities compared with Whites. Significant results of the study included (a) a majority (61%) of the respondents reported a low swimming ability with 10% of the sample unable to swim; (b) two-thirds (66%) of the Free/Reduced School Lunch recipients self-reported no/low swim ability; (c) White respondents self-reported significantly higher swimming ability than Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino respondents; (d) greater than two-thirds (69%) of the Black/African American respondents self-reported low swimming skills, while 58% of the Hispanic/Latino and 42% of the White respondents self-reported similar swim ability; (e) 14% of Black/African American and 7% of Hispanic/Latino respondents self-reported that they were not able to swim, while less than 6% of White respondents reported a similar lack of swim ability; (f) when controlling for income, Black/African American respondents were found to have significantly less swimming ability than White and Hispanic/Latino (pp. 7–8).

## Constraints to Swimming Participation

The scholarship across disciplines—sport sociology, kinesiology, sport management, and recreation and leisure studies—chronicles the multiple barriers that limit swimming participation among African Americans (Jackson, 2005). Elucidating further on the role and power of constraints to participation in leisure activities, Houlihan (2008) argues, “some constraints are societal and can rarely be overcome by the agency of an individual; some are personal and can only be overcome by good self-image, self-confidence, and settled values; other constraints, mediating between these two groups, need the action of the intermediaries, such as managers and policy-makers” (p. 96). The minority swimming gap has deep roots in America’s racial history. For decades during the 20th century, many pools were segregated, and relatively few were built to serve Black communities.

Racial stereotypes have also served as a constraint to participation in swimming by African Americans. For example, John Cruzat, USA Swimming’s diversity specialist, argued that these inequalities were compounded by a widespread misperception—fueled by flawed academic studies—that Blacks’ swimming ability was compromised by an innate deficit of buoyancy. Moreover, some of these stereotypes are perpetuated in Black culture from generation to generation. For example, USA Swimming Foundation’s John Cruzat noted in a 2008 interview that “these long-held beliefs are still so potent. . . . If you don’t teach your children to swim, you’re putting your grandchildren at risk.” (Associated Press, 2008).

Several authors (Edelman, 2006a, 2006b; Kimm et al. 2002; Patillo-McCoy, 2000) have effectively argued that African American children and youth have fewer familial resources at their disposal to connect them with leisure pastimes like dance or swimming. In some cases, the cost of lessons may be prohibitive when there are multiple children in one household. Without the benefit of some form of financial assistance in the form of fee waivers and scholarships, learning to swim may be out of the grasp of willing participants. Moreover, research conducted by Delva, Johnston, and O’Malley (2007) revealed that cost of equipment, geographic location of facilities, and commitment to exercise negatively impacted participation of African American youth in swimming as a physical activity. Houlihan (2008) writing about social inclusion and constraint to leisure and sport participation concluded that there are a variety of constraints operating singly or in tandem with one another that serve as barriers to participation. Furthermore, Houlihan concluded,

Some constraints are societal and can rarely be overcome by the agency of an individual; some are personal and can only be overcome by good self-image, self-confidence and settled values; other constraints, mediating these two groups, need the action of intermediaries, such as managers and policy makers. (p. 96)

Table 1, originally synthesized by Houlihan (2008) after an extensive review of the literature related to the constraints to participation in leisure and sport provides a presentation of known constraints. This table indicates the strength of varying constraints. Particularly in relationship to women, racial minorities, and disabled

**Table 1 Multiple Constraints and Exclusion in Sport and Leisure: Children and Youth**

<b>Constraint/exclusion</b>	<b>Children</b>	<b>Youth</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Poor</b>	<b>Racial Minorities</b>	<b>People with disabilities</b>
<b>Structural factors</b>						
Poor physical/social environment	+	+	+	+	++	+
Poor facilities/community capacity	+	+	+	+	+	++
Poor support network	+	+	+	+	+	++
Poor transportation	+	+	+	++	+	++
<b>Mediating factors</b>						
Organizational policies/attitudes	+	+	+	+	++	++
Labeling by society	+	++	+	+	+++	+++
Racial stereotyping	+	+	++	+	++++	+
Time allotted by organization for activity	+	+	+	+	+	+
Lack of expendable income	+	+	+	++	++	++
<b>Personal factors</b>						
Lack of skills/personal social capital	+	+	+	+	++	++
Safety	++	++	+++	++	+++	++
Powerlessness	++	++	++	++	++++	++
Poor self/body image	+	++	++	+	++	++
Hair and grooming	+	++	++	+	+++	+
Family support	++	++	++	+	++	++
Lack of information about the activity	+	+	+	+	+	+

Key: The number of + shows the severity of constraints for particular groups.

participants, the extraction of one constraint leaves several others in place. As noted in the table, some constraints impact several groups and invariably may impact swimming participation among children, youth, and minority groups.

Waller and Norwood (2009) also called attention to the manner in which many African Americans are socialized to the activity of swimming with the context of Black families and Black culture. Hofstede (1980) described culture as “. . .

the collective mental programming of the people in an environment” (p. 2). As it relates to the current issue at hand, historically, African-Americans as a cultural minority group have been conditioned by tradition to not participate in swimming and other water sports.

For many Black families, the bond between mother (sometimes grandmother) and daughter is enriched by tales of the dos and don'ts of hair maintenance; though there seem to be more don'ts than dos a lot of the time: Don't play and get sweaty once the hair has been pressed with a straightening comb or chemical straightener; don't go to sleep without securing the hair with a scarf; don't go in or near a pool of water under any circumstances. As Waller and Norwood (2009) point out, many African American beauticians discourage African American females from going swimming because of the interference of chemicals from hair products with chlorine in the pool water. The end result can be major breakage of the hair. These lessons have shaped the way Black women and girls develop their personal identity in terms of beauty and self-esteem and significantly influence the types of activities in which she will or will not participate, especially swimming. Perhaps racial differentials in the minority swimming gap are aggravated by cultural conditioning and not social exclusivity, per se, as Hastings et al. (2006) have suggested. To understand the constraints “Black hair” poses for African American female participation in swimming, it is necessary to have a basic understanding of the significance of “Black hair” in this matter.

**Black Hair.** Norwood (2010) produced poignant research that explored the cultural trappings “Black hair” imposes on Black female swimming participation. Because the texture of “Black hair” is so unique compared with other races, particularly Caucasians, hairstyling after swimming can be more exhausting than the act of swimming itself. Specifically, it is the time and cost expended that is taken into consideration when choosing to participate in swimming or not. In the minds of some African American women, especially those in the professional sector, would rather sacrifice learning a life-saving skill (swimming) over getting their hair wet. The rigors involved in maintaining their hair seems to pose more of an immediate problem as opposed to the possibly being in a situation where she will need to know how to swim to save her own life.

Norwood's point about hair is further crystallized when the transcript of an interview on National Public Radio host Michel Martin and Hampton University professor and aquatics director, Jodi Jensen is considered. Jensen's comments frame the issue surrounding “Black hair” which is problematic for African American females. This same issue is buttressed by Norwood in her doctoral dissertation entitled *I am not my hair . . . Or am I?: Exploring the minority swimming gap*. Irwin et al. (2010) affirmed the positions of Jensen and Norwood (2010) in the 2010 follow-up study commissioned by USA Swimming. Note the dialogue between Martin and Jensen displayed below:

MARTIN: Tell me about that.

Prof. JENSEN: Well, the experience that comes to mind is one of my first semesters at Hampton was in 2004. It was the spring semester, and I had a



young lady who got into to the pool, got dressed for class and got into the pool and refused to go underwater.

And so I went over to her to find out, was she afraid? Why was she not putting her head under water? And she explained to me that she just got her hair done and that it cost a lot of money to get her hair done, and she had a special event she was going to that weekend. So she was not going to get her hair wet. And so without further ado, I said okay. Do what you can today.

So that was when I first started really learning about, if you will, Black girls' hair.

MARTIN: So what was the solution? Because you can't swim without putting your head underwater. I mean, you can't, to my way of thinking, you can't really learn, right?

Prof. JENSEN: Absolutely. Well, last semester, last fall semester, because I used to tell my students, my female students, buy a cap and, you know, put your hair in a cap, and you'll be fine. And I had students say well, my hair still gets wet even with a cap on.

So last semester, I had some female students that came up with the bright idea of taking Saran Wrap and wrapping Saran Wrap around their hair and then putting the swim cap over top of the Saran Wrap, and apparently it didn't get their hair wet. So it was a great hit. So I think these young ladies were innovators (Martin & Jensen, 2009).

Withstanding the voluminous nature of the evidence that points to the myriad of challenges that African Americans face regarding swimming, what is summoned to memory is the title of one of the late sport journalists Ralph Wiley's books: *What Black People Should Do Now*. Wiley, in this classic, encourages the Black community to be proactive and take a leadership role in resolving its problems. Beyond the research already published, the funding provided by organizations such as USA Swimming and ConocoPhillips, what will the grassroots, civic, educational, religious, and political leadership within Black communities across the nation do to dissipate the swimming problem? As Wiley (1993) so eloquently noted,

. . . scholars have take to writing articles and books about us lately. Well, not about us, but what they expect we will do [as African Americans]. So the first problem we must resolve is which acceptable Black people will decide our course and relay our intent to the world. (p. 4)

Inherently, relating Wiley's prophetic voice to the swimming challenge, the question for African Americans should be threefold: (a) deciding who should be their "voice" in addressing the problem, (b) what the consolidated message to the African American community should be, and (c) finding meaningful points of departure to begin addressing the problem.

## How We Begin to Bridge the Gap: Strategic Points of Departure

Over the span of history, the efficacies of effective and culturally responsive strategies to rectify problems that confront the African American community have been well documented (Belgrave & Allison, 2006; Dyson, 2008; Green & Goetting, 2010). Partial resolutions to problems that range from disparities in employment, housing, education, and recreation opportunities have come about as a function of strategic actions employed by the African American community. In the case of bridging the swimming gap, the same will hold true—African Americans will have to play a major catalytic role in solving the problem.

### Strategy 1: Articulate the Problem Through Combined Voices

Perhaps the first place those who are concerned about the swimming gap and African Americans should begin is to own the problems and decide who bears the burden of solving it. The scholarly evidence (Irwin et al. 2008, 2010; Norwood, 2010; Saluja et al., 2006; Waller & Norwood, 2009) concurs that this is a collective social and public health problem that spans disciplines. It adversely impacts individuals, racial groups, and entire communities.

When Cullen Jones mounted the podium with his teammates to accept the 4 × 100m freestyle relay gold medal at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, that signaled a new beginning in the continued effort to model swimming as a viable lifetime sport for African Americans. Jones' genesis in swimming and his accomplishments typify the African American community's complex relationship with swimming. Jones and other high visibility African American swimmers, along with their corporate partners, are making a difference in communities across the country where they continue to stress the importance of children and youth learning to swim. The progress of the "Make a Splash" initiative, in which Jones is a major "face" and "voice," is nothing short of herculean. According to USA Swimming, more than 500,000 children have taken lessons through Make a Splash Local Partners and 22,000 of those youth received discounted lessons through USA Swimming Foundation donations (USA Swimming, 2010). On the whole, it appears that progress is eminent. The incremental growth in the number of minorities involved in national competitions provides the evidence of progress, but for many young African Americans, access and opportunity to learn to swim remains a challenge. The faces and voices of Black swimmers such as Cullen Jones, Anthony Ervin, Sabir Muhammad, Maritza McClendon, Alana Dillette, and Olympic diving hopeful, Michael Wright have a catalytic effect in combating this problem, but they are not solely responsible for brokering opportunities for African Americans in the United States. For example, Ervin, in an interview once noted that he was "uncomfortable bearing the torch for an entire race" (Celizic, 2008).

The task ahead is mammoth and is greater than the notoriety or brand of any one individual or group. In the same manner that the African American community has embraced the fights against employment and housing discrimination, educational disparities, hypertension, diabetes, HIV-AIDS, and other causes, learning to swim must be right at the top of the African American agenda in the 21st century. The swimming gap problem is one that will have to be borne by the recreation and sport

industry, its affiliated organizations, and most importantly, the African American community if a meaningful difference is going to be made.

## **Strategy 2: Engage in Meaningful Advocacy**

Perhaps the second major point of departure in rectifying the drowning problem is to approach it from a public policy standpoint. Rockwood (1980) surmised that promulgating policy is a vital part in solving public problems. He further argued that the public policy process is dynamic, engages multiple actors and stakeholders, and is issue driven (p. 216). Withstanding the data related to water safety related injuries, drownings, and the gap in opportunities to learn to swim, approaching the swimming problem among African Americans must be considered as health and safety related public policy issue. In addition, Santo and Mildner (2010) suggest that there are numerous linkages between sport, advocacy and shaping public policy. Furthermore Santo and Mildner (2010) argue,

The implications of local policy decisions extend beyond the world of spectators sports. Public health issues reflect our ability to be active where we live and are linked to development policies and public investment decisions that hinder everyday lifestyles. Public officials make decisions that determine whether neighborhoods will be walkable, whether roads networks will accommodate cyclists, and whether community residents will have recreation facilities (p. x).

Ultimately, meaningful advocacy and policy actions will make a difference in the fight to erode the constraints to swimming among African Americans. For example, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has been a staunch proponent of early (age four) learn-to-swim programs. Vibrant advocacy that impacts public policy has resulting in the installation of appropriate fencing, pool covers and alarms, enhanced lifeguarding/water safety instruction, improved resuscitation techniques, and the use of personal flotation devices to prevent unnecessary drownings (Brenner, 2003, p.173). The aforementioned example illustrates the power of advocacy as a shaper of policy and can be mimicked and applied to case of African Americans and swimming.

Relatedly, the development of an advocacy coalition is one of the lynchpins of effective public policy efforts (Rockwood, 1980). Houlihan (2005) argued that advocacy coalitions are vital to the success of promoting key sports such as swimming. The advocacy coalition framework (ACF) has emerged as a highly regarded basis for impacting public policy, both in its own right and in combination with other frameworks. For instance, Camera (2010) argued that part of advocacy to improve the swimming gap begins with (a) promoting swimming among high risk individuals and communities, (b) promoting the benefits that the sport of swimming offers to individuals, (c) building advocates of the sport to support its ability to reach nonparticipants, and (d) educating policymakers about the critical issues that confront the sport and the manifold barriers to participation. Recreation and sport organizations that have ethnic minority affiliations such as the Ethnic Minority Society of the National Recreation and Parks Association and the National Association of Black Sports Professionals, in tandem with other community-based stakeholders, can serve the advocacy efforts and influence public policy by

- Identifying public policy best practices (local, state, and national) and replication strategies for policies that have effectively created more access to opportunity for swimming for African Americans.
- Encourage new and existing advocacy institutions to develop the capacity and resources to mount advocacy initiatives and/or campaigns to influence public policy that helps address the disparities in swimming outcomes for African Americans.
- Spur research and advocacy that lead to the creation of policies that improve swimming opportunities and outcomes for African Americans.

Effective advocacy is built on a broad based analytical approach to problem solving. Inherently, advocacy that impacts policy in a positive manner is effective. Well practiced individual and community advocacy increases the likelihood of facilitating change.

### **Strategy 3: Focus on the Funding Challenge**

Beyond the need for instructional programs at the grassroots level, the renovation of existing or construction of new facilities and the accurate reporting of swimming related deaths, funding is the greatest challenge. Sustainable funding at the local, state, and federal levels is the primary cog in the resolution of the swimming gap. Contextualized research, dissemination of public information regarding drowning, advocacy, and the promulgation of policy are excellent beginnings toward resolving the problem, but developing a solidified funding base gives the effort “legs.”

Programs such as the Carol M. White Physical Education Program (PEP) operated by the U.S. Department of Education grants provide funding for the development and implementation of physical education programs that promote increased physical activity and healthy lifestyles for children—and support life-long physical activity. Since its inception in 2001, PEP grants have ranged from \$100,000 to \$750,000, with the average grant being \$427,000. One of the inherent problems with PEP is stability of funding. For example, in FY 2010, recipients received \$80 million in PEP grant money. Currently, despite the recent adoption of the FY 2011 congressional budget, questions remain about funding for PEP this fiscal year and beyond (Athletic Business, 2011). Swimming instruction should be part an integral part of the programmatic thrust. Moreover, federal pass-through programs such as the Community Prevention Grants Program (Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention), Community Development Block Grant (Department of Housing and Urban Development), and the de-funded National Youth Sports Program can all contribute. Invariably, the redesign of program requirements and regulations by agency officials and legislators is sponsored initiative requires a redesign by policymakers to better accommodate swimming. Local units of government through their respective legislative bodies must continue to explore options for making grants at the local level to off-set the cost of learn-to-swim programs.

Finally, sport based philanthropy that targets the implementation of swimming programs that includes lessons and the upgrading of facilities represents a complimentary step. Through league and team foundations involving the National

Football League, Major League Baseball, the National Basketball Association, professional sport franchises, the NCAA, NAIA, YMCA, YWCA, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, major sporting goods manufacturers such as Speedo, Nike, and the National Recreation and Park Association can all play a major role in resolving the funding problem.

#### Strategy 4: Creating a Covenant to Craft Solutions

What is striking about the matter in which the swimming gap has been treated in the African American community is the amount of conversation versus the amount of definitive action. Much of the response is reactive as opposed to proactive. Each time there is a release of a report on swimming that is released by USA Swimming or a major research institution such as the simple analysis of the of the Author and activist Tavis Smiley (2006b) in his book *The Covenant With Black America* posits that

... to ensure neighborhood residents have decent place to engage in physical activity, policy-makers need to implement public policies that mandate safe, attractive, local parks and encourage local involvement by churches, parks and recreation departments, and others to maintain programs and facilities. It is equally important that they reform the way schools are designed and built in order to open indoor and outdoor recreational sites on school grounds for community use after school hours. (pp. 17-18)

Who should orchestrate this covenant? It should begin with local residents that are involved in community-based organizations, who engage local recreation and sport organizations, churches that advocate health through physical activity, elected officials at all levels of government and corporate entities that proclaim “the responsible, community-conscious” mantra in communities across America. At the heart of the covenant there must be a commitment to resolving the problem over time through eradicating the constraints to swimming for African Americans, with particular emphasis on children and youth. It is interesting to note that when the agenda of the Congressional Black Caucus is examined, preventing unnecessary drownings among African Americans is absent from their legislative and policy agenda. The same holds true for the Black Caucuses of the ten states with the highest drowning rates for African Americans—Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, Minnesota, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin (Pool & Spa News, 2006). One can only speculate why this important matter is not on the agenda alongside of the manifold health related items that adversely impact African Americans in the United States.

Perhaps the place to begin the journey of correcting the swimming gap is with the development of a *covenant* between government agencies, the private sector, swimming advocacy groups, academic institutions, neighborhood and community based organizations, and elected officials to provide instruction, facilities, and promote swimming as a life-time sport/leisure pursuit. A covenant is defined as “a solemn commitment among a group of people to act in harmony to achieve specific goals” (Smiley, 2006a, p. 90). Smiley (2006a) further notes that meaningful covenants are marked by momentum and are “strategically sustained, coordinated, and require long-term action” (p. 90). Author and social critic Tavis Smiley in the book

*The Covenant in Action* advocates for covenant-based action that is transformational. Furthermore, Smiley (2006a) argued that evoking African Americans to increase their levels of physical activity toward positive health and wellness outcomes must be a priority in the Black community (p. 17). USA Swimming must continue to be the catalytic partner that incites, inspires, and encourages viable and productive partnerships, collaborations, and strategic alliances to address the swimming gap. Table 2 provides a summary of potential national partners to catalyze a broad-based “learn to swim” agenda.

**Table 2 National Partners in Promoting a Swimming Agenda**

Organization	Section	Purpose
American College of Sports Medicine	State and regional chapters	American College of Sports Medicine promotes and integrates scientific research, education, and practical applications of sports medicine and exercise science to maintain and enhance physical performance, fitness, health, and quality of life.
American Red Cross	State and local chapters	ARC promotes swimming and water safety instruction.
American Alliance for Health Physical Education and Dance	American Association for Physical Activity and Recreation (AAPAR)  American Association for Health Education (AAHE)  National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE)  Aquatics Professionals Section	AAHPERD’s mission is to promote and support leadership, research, education, and best practices in the professions that support creative, healthy, and active lifestyles.
Boy’s and Girl’s Clubs of America	National, state, and local affiliates	To enable all young people, especially those who need us most, to reach their full potential as productive, caring, responsible citizens.
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention	National and state affiliates, local public health departments	CDC’s mission is to collaborate to create the expertise, information, and tools that people and communities need to protect their health—through health promotion, prevention of disease, injury and disability, and preparedness for new health threats.

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Organization	Section	Purpose
Children's Defense Fund	National and local affiliates	The Children's Defense Fund (CDF) is a non-profit child advocacy organization that works relentlessly to ensure a level playing field for all children. CDF champions policies and programs that lift children out of poverty; protect them from abuse and neglect; and ensure their access to health care, quality education, and a moral and spiritual foundation. CDF advocates nationwide on behalf of children to ensure children are always a priority.
International City/County Managers Association	National, state and local units of government	ICMA creates excellence in local governance by developing and fostering professional local government management worldwide. The organization provides technical and management assistance, training, and information resources in the areas of performance measurement, ethics education and training, community and economic development, environmental management, technology, advocacy and other topics to its members and the broader local government community.
National Recreation and Park Association	Ethnic Minority Society	NRPA is the leading advocacy organization dedicated to the advancement of public parks and recreation opportunities. Founded in 1965 through the merger of 5 national organizations dedicated to the same cause, NRPA has grown over the years—in total membership, in outreach efforts, in building partnerships, and in serving as the voice and defender of parks and recreation.
National Swimming Pool Foundation	National	The National Swimming Pool Foundation (NSPF), founded in 1965, is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to improving public health worldwide by attracting more people to safer aquatic environments. NSPF is committed to improving public health by encouraging healthier living through aquatic education and research.
Young Men's Christian Association	Local, state and national affiliates	YMCA's mission is to put Christian principles into practice through programs that build a healthy spirit, mind, and body for all; our impact is felt when an individual makes a healthy choice, when a mentor inspires a child, and when a community comes together for the common good.
Young Women's Christian Association	Local, state and national affiliates	YWCA is dedicated to eliminating racism, empowering women, and promoting peace, justice, freedom and dignity for all.

Organization	Section	Purpose
USA Swimming	National	USA Swimming is the National Governing Body for the sport of swimming. USAS provides programs and services for its members, supporters, affiliates, and the interested public.
ConocoPhillips	National	The third largest energy company in the United States that has a long history of community investment. One of their targeted programmatic investments is USA Swimming and the USA Swimming Foundation. In 2009, the company began sponsoring <i>Make a Splash</i> , a national child-focused antidrowning initiative created by the USA Swimming Foundation, which operates by aligning the nation's top learn-to-swim resources in an effort to save lives.

### Strategy 5: Use Economic Leverage to Generate Funding

One often underutilized strategy that African Americans can employ to build new revenue streams to potentially subsidize instructional programs for swimming and the renovation of construction of aquatics facilities is to leverage their spending power. For example, it is estimated that by 2012 the purchasing power of African Americans in the United States will exceed \$1 trillion (Magazine Publishers of America, 2010). More importantly, by targeting the 10 metropolitan areas (Atlanta, Chicago, Dallas, Detroit, Houston, Los Angeles, Miami, New York, Philadelphia, and Washington D.C.), marketers can reach 40% of the total African-American/Black population (Magazine Publishers of America, 2010). The available data are not crystal clear about how much African Americans purchase annually in terms of hair care products, food and beverages, automobiles, and sporting goods. For example, the Black hair care business has ballooned into a \$9 billion a year industry here in the United States (BlackAmericans.com, 2010). A small percentage of revenues set aside annually by each of these industries could make a significant impact. Moreover, withstanding the number of Fortune 500 companies and professional sport franchises that lie within the span of the 50 largest cities in the nation, even a miniscule investment/reinvestment would help drive swimming initiatives. A well negotiated investment strategy by corporations, including sport goods manufacturers and professional sport franchises as a part of their outreach endeavors, could help markedly in closing the swimming gap.

### Creating a Call to Action

A third critical beginning point is to move beyond the discourse and toward broad-based coalition building and grass-roots level action. If there is going to be a legitimate response the preeminent organizations that advocate for the critical issues that confront African Americans in the United States—The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League (NUL)—must sound the alarm. With more than 100 local affiliates in 36 states and



the District of Columbia, providing direct services that impact and improve the lives of more than 2 million people nationwide, NUL has a big voice in helping to bridge the swimming gap. The NUL has publically acknowledged the urgency to teach African American children and youth to swim. In a 2008 press release that acknowledged the accomplishments of Cullen Jones, Urban League CEO and President Mark Morial (2008) stated,

Statistics show that Black children, ages 10-19, are three times more likely to drown as Whites and 58 percent of them don't know how to swim, compared to 31 percent of White children. Clearly, more African Americans need to know how to survive in the water and Cullen Jones is on a mission to see that they do. One way he plans to deal with that problem is through the *Cullen Jones Diversity Tour*, a Bank of America backed effort that will include swim meets and clinics for minority youth throughout the country. Jones adds his golden touch to efforts by such pioneers as Jim Ellis, the legendary founder of the Philadelphia Department of Recreation Swim Club, whose commitment to turning out world-class Black swimmers was chronicled in the 2007 movie, "Pride," starring Terrence Howard. And this year, the National Black Heritage Championship Swim Meet attracted more than 500 African-American swimmers to its annual event in Orlando. As the summer winds down, we are reminded that every day, nine African American children drown and that number is rising (National Urban League, 2010).

Over the last two reporting periods the NUL has highlighted multiple initiatives that include the *Wellness Tour*, and the *Act Against AIDS Leadership Initiative*, all which contribute to the health and wellness of African Americans. Withstanding the impact that NUL has in Black America, we can only wonder what would happen if the NUL embraced the problem with swimming in African American communities nationwide in the same manner that it continues to embrace the battle with HIV/AIDS in the Black community.

It is time for other powerful organizations whose foundational mission is to education and uplift Black communities, to join the fight to close the minority swimming gap. Organizations to be added to the "call" list can include but are not limited to 100 Black Men of America, Inc., National Coalition of 100 Black Women, Inc., Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs) such as Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc., Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc., Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. There is strength in numbers and these organizations have chapters and thousands of members spread throughout the United States. Black communities often defer to these organizations for help and guidance. Incorporating learn-to-swim initiatives in their national service agendas can help shed more light on the minority swimming issues. Furthermore, BGLOs have the ability to capitalize on their popularity with Black teens and preteens they mentor, who also aspire to become fraternity and sorority members themselves one day.

In keeping with the underlying theme "it takes a village to raise a child," involving local Black businesses to push the learn-to-swim effort is necessary. For instance, in an effort to draw more African American girls and women to swimming, Norwood (2010) suggested that YMCAs and YWCAs in Black communities could partner with local beauty salons and hair braiding shops to offer free or reduced services for girls and women who take lessons. This essentially does two

things: (a) It puts YMCA’s and YWCA’s aquatic practitioners in a position of at least appearing to be in touch with the cultural constraints impacting the minority swimming gap, and (b) it offers a proactive solution to the “hair wet” issue for many Black females who would otherwise not participate in swimming. Table 3 provides a listing of national predominately African American organizations that may potentially embrace and promote a national “learn to swim” initiative.

**Table 3 Predominately African American Organizations to Set the “Learn to Swim” Agenda**

Organization	Member Org./Section	Purpose
100 Black Men of America Based in Atlanta, Georgia <a href="http://www.100Blackmen.org">www.100Blackmen.org</a>	State and local affiliates	Working to improve the quality of life within the African American community.
100 Black Women of America Based in Atlanta, Georgia <a href="http://www.100Blackmen.org">www.100Blackmen.org</a>	State and local affiliates	Working to improve the quality of life within the African American community.
African American Planning Commission (AAPC) <i>Based in Brooklyn, New York</i> <a href="http://www.aapci.org">www.aapci.org</a>	State and local affiliates	Addresses issues of homelessness (domestic violence, HIV/AIDS, housing shortage, and unemployment) within the communities in which we live and serve.
Be Someone, Inc. Based in Atlanta, Georgia <a href="http://www.besomeone.org">www.besomeone.org</a>	State and local affiliates	Uses numerous tools, including the game of chess, to promote self-esteem, responsibility, and analytical thinking among at-risk kids.
Blacks In Government (BIG). <i>Based in Washington, DC</i> <a href="http://www.bignet.org">www.bignet.org</a>	State and local affiliates	Promotes equity in all aspects of life, and excellence in public service.
Black Women In Sisterhood For Action (BISA) Based in Washington, DC <a href="http://www.bisa-hq.org">www.bisa-hq.org</a>	State and local affiliates	Develops and promotes alternative strategies for educational and career development of Black women.
Chi Eta Phi Nursing Sorority Based in Washington D.C. <a href="http://www.chietaphi.com">www.chietaphi.com</a>	State and local affiliates	An internationally recognized leader in the provision of health education, leadership development, and service to the community.
Conference of Minority Public Administrators Based in Washington D.C. <a href="http://www.compaonline.org">www.compaonline.org</a>	State and local affiliates	COMPA is one of America’s leading national organizations committed to excellence in public service and administration in city, state, county, and federal government.
Congressional Black Caucus Based in Washington D.C <a href="http://thecongressionalBlackcaucus.lee.house.gov/#">http://thecongressionalBlackcaucus.lee.house.gov/#</a>	Members of U.S. House of Representatives and Senate;	Prioritize legislation and funding fundamental to the quality of life of America’s youth (education, job training, health care, etc.)

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Organization	Member Org./Section	Purpose
Jack and Jill of America Based in Washington, DC www.jack-and-jill.org	State and local affiliates	A family organization that provides cultural, social, civic and recreational activities that stimulate and expand the mind to enhance life.
National Council of Negro Women, Inc. Based in Washington D.C. www.ncnw.org	State and local affiliates	NCNW is a council of national African American women's organizations and community-based sections. Founded in 1935, the NCNW mission is to lead, develop, and advocate for women of African descent as they support their families and communities. NCNW fulfills this purpose through research, advocacy, and national and community-based services and programs on issues of health, education, and economic empowerment in the United States and Africa.
National Action Network Based in New York, New York www.nationalactionnetwork.net	State and local affiliates	This organization promotes a modern civil rights agenda that includes just and decency for all people regardless of race, social justice for communities, and the improvement of race relations.
National Black Panhellenic Council Based in Decatur, GA www.nphchq.org	Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Iota Theta Phi Fraternity Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity Omega Psi Phi Fraternity	NPHC promotes interaction through forums, meetings and other mediums for the exchange of information and engages in cooperative programming and initiatives through various activities and functions.
National Association of Black Journalists Based in Adelphi, MD www.nabj.org	State and local affiliates	NABJ is the largest organization of journalists of color in the nation.
National Association of Black Social Workers, Inc. (NABSWI) Based in Washington D.C. www.nabswi.org	State and local affiliates	NABSSWI is comprised of people of African ancestry, is committed to enhancing the quality of life and empowering people of African ancestry through advocacy, human services delivery, and research.

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<b>Organization</b>	<b>Member Org./Section</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
National Black Child Development Institute (NBCDI) Based in Washington, DC www.nbcdi.org	State and local affiliates	Improves and protects the lives of African American children.
National Black Nurses Association (NBNA) Based in Washington, D.C. http://www.nbna.org	State and local affiliates	The National Black Nurses Association's mission is to provide a forum for collective action by Black nurses to investigate, define and advocate for the health care needs of African Americans and to implement strategies that ensure access to health care, equal to, or above health care standards of the larger society.
National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Based in Baltimore, Maryland www.naacp.org	State and local affiliates	A champion of social justice that has fought long and hard to ensure that the voices of African Americans would be heard.
National Urban League (NUL) Based in New York, New York www.nul.org	State and local affiliates	The nation's oldest and largest community- based movement devoted to empowering African Americans to enter the economic and social mainstream.
National Forum for Black Public Administrators www.nfbpa.org	State and local affiliates	NFBPA conducts research on selected social and economic issues endemic to Blacks; sponsors and conducts national and regional forums that enable the discussion of timely issues and topical concerns of the Black community.
Rainbow PUSH Coalition Based in Chicago, Illinois www.rainbowpush.org	State and local affiliates	This organization, led by Jesse Jackson, is a progressive organization fighting for social change as a mighty coalition of workers, women and people of color.
The National Association of Black Sports Professionals Based in New York, New York www.nabsp.com	State and local affiliates	NABSP works to establish a presence in local communities through various outreach programs and initiatives that encourage and foster youth sports industry interest beyond the playing field or court.

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Organization	Member Org./Section	Purpose
National Association of Black Scuba Divers Based in Washington D.C. www.nabsdivers.org	State and local affiliates	To create a network of people and resources who provide educational experiences that enhance and promote an appreciation of diving and an awareness of the aquatic environment. This network will build unity and camaraderie to transfer the legacy to future generations.

We have often pondered what might happen if African American television moguls such as Oprah Winfrey, Tyler Perry, Mo'Nique, Tavis Smiley, and Montel Williams along with nationally syndicated radio hosts Michael Baisden, Steve Harvey, and Tom Joyner joined the fight to encourage African Americans to learn to swim. Radio host Tom Joyner has had tremendous success in launching health related initiatives nationwide. For example, in 2009 using his morning radio show as a platform, Joyner launched the "Take a Loved One to the Doctor Day" program that was well received by the Black community. In 2009, thousands of African Americans across the nation were taken to physicians to get medical assistance after several national organizations endorsed the program. In theory, a national "Take a Loved One to Learn to Swim" program might yield the same net effect. What gives further potential to a media sponsored "learn to swim" initiative is when the agenda is set by the NUL and endorsed by major political stalwarts such as the National Conference of Black Mayors (NCBM) and the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC). Arguably, with the right mix of advocacy, corporate, community based organization, media, and political partners the results could be astonishing for the African American community.

## Programs That Work

Across the nation there are several tremendous programs that have emerged that help to bridge the swimming gap for African American children and youth. The initiatives include Swim for Life and Make a Splash, which is sponsored by USA Swimming and ConocoPhillips.

### Miami HEAT Learn to Swim Program

For example, on an annual basis the Miami Heat team up with the American Red Cross, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Florida, the City of Coral Gables, and the AVP to host the annual "Learn to Swim" community swim safety campaign in South Florida. HEAT players, along with the HEAT Dancers, get into the pool with children from HEAT Academies for a special swimming lesson. The Xtreme Team and Burnie the Mascot are also in attendance to provide entertainment for the children. AVP professional beach volleyball players, Olympian Holly McPeak, who is in South Florida for the AVP Cuervo Gold Crown Crocs Tour Miami Open, were also on

hand to interact with the swimmers from HEAT Academy, an after-school program also sponsored by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Florida.

In addition, The HEAT also dedicate an annual home game as “Water Safety Awareness Night,” where fans in attendance will be offered a \$10 off swimming lesson coupon to be redeemed at select authorized providers of American Red Cross swimming lessons. With an abundance of bodies of water and residential swimming pools, the state of Florida ranks first nationally in drowning fatalities for children under the age of five. Florida’s overall drowning death rate is twice the national rate in all drowning fatalities, and Miami-Dade County leads the state. This effort will launch a community-wide water safety awareness campaign that will continue through the summer months with surprise visits from HEAT players and talent to various pool locations throughout Miami-Dade and Broward counties. The HEAT is currently producing a public service announcement, which will be distributed throughout South Florida later in the summer (Miami HEAT.com, 2011).

### **Atlanta Falcons Youth Foundation**

Three years ago the Atlanta Falcons Youth Foundation (*AFYF*) began making grants to support swimming in minority communities. In 2009 new grant to the Friends of Grant Park Pool promises to keep more kids active through swimming. Spurred by an AFYF challenge grant of \$10,000, neighborhood residents began the process of raising \$40,000 to support pool improvements. With those funds, the neighborhood will be able install a zero-entry kiddie pool and shade-splash spot as a part of a larger overhaul. The grant also expands the foundation’s work in urban swimming programs. It complements AFYF’s earlier \$500,000 multiyear commitment supporting USA Swimming’s Make A Splash! initiative (Atlanta Falcons, 2009). In all, AFYF is announcing 16 grants to nonprofit organizations throughout Georgia to encourage fitness through youth football and cheerleading, basketball, soccer, swimming, healthy lifestyle initiatives, and other multisport activities. These investments will serve kids in metro Atlanta, North Georgia, and other counties statewide including Gordon, Murray, Whitfield, and Stephens.

### **Aquatic Foundation of Metropolitan Los Angeles**

In January 2010, the Aquatic Foundation of Metropolitan Los Angeles (AFMLA) was awarded a \$20,000 grant from Edison International, which it will use to create the Ted Watkins Aquatic Center. The Ted Watkins Aquatic Training Center (TWATC), located in the Watts community of Los Angeles at the Ted Watkins Memorial Park, will serve a large low income audience with limited water sport exposure and training. The AMLA seeks to provide inner city youth with the training necessary to compete for nearby beach, harbor, and pool operations employment opportunities. AFMLA is a nonprofit organization that seeks to build public awareness of the physical and mental benefits of swimming and to establish and promote water programs for all age groups with special emphasis on teaching inner-city and low-income children to swim and train for national swimming competitions. The Edison International grant comes from their ongoing support of nonprofit organizations that strive to maintain or improve the quality of life in their community.

AFMLA will work in collaboration with the LA County Department of Parks and Recreations, Red Cross, and LA County Scuba to provide a comprehensive aquatics training program. Program participants will receive aquatic training including CPR, first aid, water safety, pool filtration, maintenance and construction, and swimming instruction both in the classroom and the pool, plus open water instruction in the ocean. Scuba training, which is the first step to a scuba diving career and mandatory resume and interview training sessions, will also be provided.

### **Nile Swim Club of Yeadon, PA**

The Nile Swim Club is the nation's first African-American-owned private swim club. It was established in the comfortable, racially diverse suburban community of Yeadon, PA in 1958. The club's genesis is steeped in an unfortunate act of racial discrimination. When two African-American families applied for membership to the racially exclusive, now defunct Yeadon Swim Club, club management stonewalled the applicants, indicated that their paper work had become lost and refused to admit them as guests or members of the facility. In response, Yeadon's African-American community solidified and decided to build its own private swim club. Stung by the Yeadon Swim Club's rejection, the borough's Black residents incorporated the swim club, acquired two acres of land, and opened their own swimming pool in 1959. The club's opening was a significant story of African American economic self-determination and attracted broad national media coverage and the attention of luminaries such as Harry Belafonte and Motown's Supremes.

In 2007, the club launched a \$5 million expansion program that included the construction of three heated pools, an 18-hole miniature golf course, a 150-seat banquet facility, a fitness center, and basketball and tennis courts. Construction was completed in 2008. Currently, the club owns a 4.5 acre parcel of land and claims a membership of 210 families (Nile Swim Club, 2010). Including among the Ambassadors are representatives from the Philadelphia Urban League, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity, and the *Philadelphia Tribune*. Each organization serves a predominately African American constituency. This group of Ambassadors assists the club in garnering forums to promote swimming as a leisure pursuit and sport among African Americans in the greater Philadelphia area.

### **The Swim School- Shreveport, LA**

Shreveport, Louisiana tragically made national news in the summer of 2010 when six African American teenagers ranging in age from 13–18 years old all drowned in the Red River. The victims included five males and one female. The teens, along with several adult family members and friends, were reportedly there for a “swimming party” (Shahid, 2010). Ironically, none of the victims could swim. In light of this horrific tragedy, The Swim School in Shreveport began to offer year-round lessons to children and adults with enrollment increasing over time. It is a member of the United States Swim School Association and the National Drowning Prevention Alliance. Part of their initiative to teach children how to swim includes their “Pools in Schools” program. This initiative consists of a 30-min presentation in local schools on water safety in and out of the pool and encourages parents to sign

their children up for swimming lessons as well as themselves. Akin to the experience of many community-based programs nationwide The Swim School continues to experience funding challenges.

While the services and mission of *The Swim School* are to ultimately equip children a life-saving skill, there is an issue of their services being financially accessible to low-income families; however, one scuba instructor at The Swim School suggested that one practical solution to the problem would be to allow a church group, or any other group, to swim at the school during off hours at a discount. Unfortunately, financial access is not the only constraint Shreveport aquatics officials have to consider in their push to teach more children how to swim.

African American swimmers such as Sabir Muhammad, Cullen Jones, and Martiea McClendon are exceptional models who can inspire African Americans to learn to swim as a matter of personal safety and as a lifetime leisure pursuit. The harsh truth is that their accomplishments and influence can only go so far in rectifying the problem. Viable partnerships between USA Swimming, sport and recreation related corporations and professional associations, policymakers, and other stakeholders working in tandem with city and county recreation agencies, school districts, and community-based organizations will inevitably make a difference.

## **Why African American Children Must Learn to Swim: A Personal Appeal**

It was not so long ago that an incident occurred that indelibly persuaded me to make sure that everyone in my immediate family learned to swim. In the spring of 1975 a former college football teammate of mine gave my roommate and I a ride home to begin summer break. Little did we know that this would be the last time that we would see him alive. After unloading our gear from his car, he drove off heading to a city in the Midwest to spend the weekend with another teammate before heading home. As the account went, my two teammates pushed their canoe into the murky waters of the local river and began to paddle their way downriver. Suddenly as the currents became swifter the canoe capsized and both men went under. One teammate was able to swim to safety because he had learned to swim in middle school, while the other drowned because he never learned to swim. The survivor of this unfortunate incident never returned to school and carried the burden our friend's death for a number of years. What makes this personal tragedy even more memorable is that at the university we attended, passing beginning swimming was a requirement for graduation. This physical education course was mandatory for all students with the exception of those that were able to obtain a medical exemption. Our teammate that succumbed had enrolled in beginning swimming fall quarter of the next academic year. Several of us for years have pondered whether this required course in beginning swimming would have saved our teammate's life. This event was transformative for me because I would later in life as a parks and recreation director advocate that all people learn to swim, especially African Americans that lived and played in central city areas. As an administrator, I made it my personal priority to ensure the equitable distribution of facilities and opportunities for people to learn to swim.



## Conclusion

Children's Defense Fund (CDF) president Marian Wright Edelman, in one of her monthly CDF columns tells a compelling story about the plight of children in America using a parable of a wealthy family with six children. In this narrative, five of the six children are well taken care of while the "sixth" child remains uncared for. Edelman notes that this family provides the best of care and enrichment activities, including swimming lessons, for the first five but does not provide the same standard of care and privilege for the sixth. While the first five prosper, the sixth struggles on multiple levels and ultimately falls woefully behind the other children, needlessly placing the child at risk. This striking analogy compels society, the recreation and sport industry, and the African American community to take responsibility for protecting the well-being of the "sixth" child. Learning to swim toward the end of sustaining life and engagement in an enjoyable physical activity over the lifespan is a way we protect the "sixth" child—African American children that cannot swim. The critical question is "Who will take responsible for protecting this child?"

Public health officials insist that drowning deaths are preventable (Fiore & Heidemann, 2004). The critical question lies in what the African American community is willing to do to stop the cycle. The staunch truth is that the African American community must own some of the responsibility for determining the magnitude of the problem. To begin working on this pervasive problem immediately, there are a series of action steps that can be done locally and nationally. The first crucial step is recognizing that change is catalyzed by and through the establishment of a meaningful agenda relating to swimming as a public health concern for African Americans. Second, continue to urge organizations such as the Congressional Black Caucus and the National Conference of Black Mayors to push legislation and policies to fund swimming initiatives. Third, vigorously advocate for the sponsorship of swimming programs and facility renovations by professional sport franchises and sport related philanthropies across sport areas as a part of their community outreach initiatives. Fourth, examine the leverage that emanates from the collective buying power of African Americans and address the funding problem from that vantage point.

For as much as swimming is a great lifetime leisure pursuit, a tremendous recreational and competitive sport, and the activity itself represents a great form of physical activity, in the final analysis, for some African Americans, it is a matter of life and death. The urgings by swimming luminaries such as Cullen Jones, Anthony Ervin, Sabir Muhammad, Maritza McClendon, Alana Dillette, and Michael Wright coupled with the efforts of USA Swimming have helped to make great strides in reducing the swimming gap. The great hope of the authors is that organizations such as the NUL, NAACP, NCBM, and CBC in partnership with key media moguls such as Oprah Winfrey and Tom Joyner will embrace this worthy cause. We hope that African Americans will embrace learning to swim with the same vigor that has been given to combating HIV/AIDS and obesity in the African American community. To fix it, it must first be collectively owned.

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