

Wading Troubled Waters

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July 1, 2004

A Florida foundation is determined to give infants and toddlers a “safe start” around water so they don’t become drowning victims

On a typically hot Florida day in 1966, 18-year-old Harvey Barnett returned home after lifeguard duty at a nearby beach, alarmed that an ambulance was parked in front of a friend’s house. A nine-month-old neighbor boy had been in a stroller, his two brothers charged with watching over him. Enticed by an opportunity to catch frogs near a drainage canal, the older boys left their young brother for what seemed like a moment.

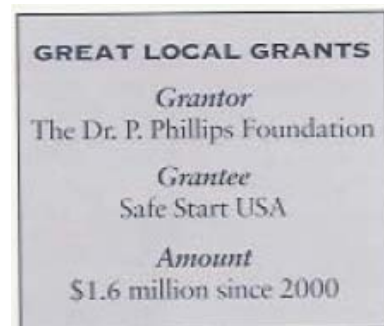
The rest of the story is all too familiar. This precocious baby somehow pulled himself out of the stroller. His brothers found him, lifeless, face down in the canal, another child incapable of saving himself after being lured and swallowed by a seductive killer—water.

Barnett tells *Philanthropy* that he “vowed right then and there to do whatever I could ... so no one ever had to see that sight again.”

He has since committed his professional and academic life to that challenge—researching, testing, and developing a novel, if somewhat controversial, program that teaches aquatic survival skills to infants as young as six months of age. To date, his system has trained 136,517 infants and young children—none has drowned. But there have been 771 fully documented cases where children fell into water and used their survival skills to save themselves

Barnett began teaching aquatic survival skills through his own for-profit company, Infant Swimming Resource. But pool access problems and thin profit margins made it difficult to grow.

In 1994, Tom Ross, a 20-year trustee of the Dr. P. Phillips Foundation of Orlando, Florida, signed up his then ten-month-old daughter for Barnett’s class and was immediately impressed with the results. So he took it upon himself to convince the trustees of the foundation that this program could put an end to accidental drowning—currently the leading cause of accidental death among children under five in many Sun Belt states.





Colin's home pool was well protected in 1993. Due to a family emergency, however, he was left in the care of a friend whose pool wasn't as secure. He fell in and drowned. His father, Lang Every, a paramedic in Daytona Beach, Florida, was first on the scene. Since that day, Every has been promoting Safe Start-an aquatic survival skills program that to date has lost none of its 130,000 graduates to drowning

It took little time to convince his fellow board members of the program's value, but before they could fund it Ross had to assist Barnett in incorporating the drowning prevention program as a 501(c)3 charity so it would be eligible for assistance from the foundation. "I was a persistent son-of-a-gun," he says.

The Phillips Foundation, which already had a strong relationship with the Central Florida YMCA, established a relationship between Barnett and the Y.

"Our goal is to take this nationally," says Ross "If this can work in Orlando, it can work in Miami. If it can work in Miami, it can work in Phoenix. There is no reason this program can't work in every YMCA in America."

At least two major hurdles stand in the way. The first is the medical community, which has not embraced swimming programs for young children, much less infants, largely because the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) asserts that "children are not developmentally ready for formal swimming lessons until after their fourth birthday." So what is the AAP's solution to prevent child drowning? "Whenever infants and toddlers are in or around water, an adult should be within an arm's length, providing 'touch supervision,'" reads an AAP statement released in 2000.

The second challenge to Safe Start's expansion is the swimming lesson philosophy of the YMCA, which, taking its cues from the medical community, stresses water comfortability, not survival skills, despite concerns that this can give children a false sense of water security through activities that are very different from the goals and objectives of Safe Start.

While there has been no formal long-term medical study examining the effectiveness of toddler and infant swimming programs, parents whose children have learned Barnett's method promote it with fervor. They respond to Barnett's critics, saying that all any skeptic has to do is see an infant maneuver safely from the middle of a pool to the side



with a combination of floating and swimming—as Barnett’s pupils are taught to do fully clothed—and they, too, will believe.

Kennette Pyles of Birmingham, Alabama, was a skeptic until a series of events changed her family’s life. Her youngest son, Ryan, took a YMCA “Mommy and Me” water course at six months then went on to a class that taught pre-swimming skills at age three. It was radically different from Barnett’s class, which later taught Pyles’ daughter Caroline when she was just a baby.

Pyles says traditional lessons did teach Ryan to see the water as his friend, with instructors praising him for his fearlessness. But when the family went on a weekend camping vacation in 1999, his fearlessness led to tragedy. The three-and-a-half year old was wearing a flotation device, begging his parents to remove it. They wouldn’t agree.

Later that day, while his mother washed dishes, Ryan somehow strayed away. She assumed he went back to the lake with his father or was playing with some of the 20 other children among the camping families. But when she later saw her husband, absent Ryan, she knew something was wrong.

A frantic search by all the families ended when Ryan’s limp body was found in the water near the dock. Paramedics landing in a helicopter took him to the nearest hospital, but it was too late.

In memory of Ryan, the family formed the Ryan Pyles Aquatic Foundation, which provides financial resources so young children can learn water survival. Kennette Pyles has become an instructor and has taught nearly 200 children how to save themselves using Barnett’s technique.

“I get lots of hugs,” she says, calling it part of her healing.

With a mission of “helping people help themselves,” the Phillips Foundation also sees the teaching of water survival as an urgent need. That’s why it hopes other foundations will want to replicate Orlando’s Safe Start program.

Over four years, the Phillips Foundation has spent about \$1.6 million on Safe Start. Phillips Foundation president Jim Hinson and his board are willing to share with other foundations what they have learned. Depending on the size of the market and the number of YMCA branches served, the foundation estimates Safe Start can be done for \$300,000 to \$400,000 a year. The board predicts, however, the program will prove so popular that it will become self-sustaining by its third year.

In central Florida, families pay \$360 plus a \$35 registration fee for the six-week course (scholarships are available through the YMCA, which has been an enthusiastic partner). “We looked at what the community’s needs were, and this community absolutely needed to do something about drowning,” says Jim Ferber, president and chief executive of the Central Florida YMCA. “We had all these YMCA swimming pools. We had the funder.

Infant Swimming Resource had the expertise. There was no reason why the three of us couldn't come together."

Barnett has also been pleased, saying the key to success has been the partnership. "It has to be a three-partner project," says Barnett. "I bring the technology of 38 years and the experience of having taught 456 instructors how to do this. The YMCA brings the facilities and support from the business community. The foundation utilizes all their influence in the community to help make the program a household name."

The program is also getting support from many physicians. Dr. David Carr, an Orlando pediatrician, has studied and written about Barnett's technique. He even enrolled his six-month-old daughter Kallie in a class.

Carr says he knows his daughter isn't "drown proofed," and that she will require adult supervision, but that's not the point. "We chose a survival-swimming program instead of a water-adjustment program because we are Kallie's advocates," writes Carr, and she deserves all the protection we can give her."

With a mission statement of "Not one more child drowns," Safe Start's central Florida program, which has been in operation for three years, has taught more than 3,000 young children. None of the 3,000 graduates have drowned, and 7 of them have used their skills to save themselves from definite drowning situations.



"I was terrified to discover how quickly something like that can happen," says Christy Butts, whose three-year-old son, Nicholas, rode his tricycle into the deep end of the family's pool when a repairman mistakenly left the gate open. Though no one saw it, Nicholas used his training to find the edge and pull himself out.

"I have absolutely no doubt," says Butts, "this program saved Nicholas."

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