

Tonyaa Weathersbee: Poor children need to learn to swim

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Lee Pitts is an internationally renowned swimming instructor who has written more than 25 articles on the topic.

He says poor children need access to pools and swimming lessons.

For them, swimming pools are not luxuries. They're necessities.

"Sure it's cheaper for municipalities to allocate resources to put basketball courts in and to pour asphalt," said Pitts, a Fort Myers television talk show host whose efforts to teach thousands of inner-city youths how to swim earned him a spot in the International Swimming Hall of Fame.

"Swimming pools require lifeguards, and they are more expensive. But knowing how to play basketball won't save your life. Knowing how to swim will.

"When we get to a place where we realize that, generations of people will begin to see pools as a necessity of life. Not as recreation but as a necessity."

MAYOR'S SWIM PROGRAM

I talked to Pitts, who once lived in Jacksonville, about the importance of poor youths being taught to swim as Mayor Alvin Brown's plans to expand a campaign to offer free swimming lessons to more youths begins this summer.

Recently, Brown said that Waterproof Jacksonville, a campaign to prevent accidental drowning, was expanding to offer free swimming lessons to 400 children attending summer school at Woodland Acres Elementary as well as to 150 children of active duty members of the military.

The expansion was made possible thanks to a \$25,000 donation by Jacksonville attorney Wayne Hogan.

It will bring the total number of youths participating from 250 in 2012 to 1,500 this summer, Brown said.

Drowning is the leading cause of death in Florida for children younger than 5; nationally, accidental drowning is the second leading cause of accidental death for children ages 1 to 14.

Nearly 70 percent of African-Americans and 40 percent of Latinos cannot swim,

The fatal drowning rate for African-American children ages 5 to 14 is almost three times that of white children in the same age range, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

But, Brown said, capacity is a problem. Also, according to the city of Jacksonville's website, lessons cost \$60 per two-week session.

That means that many youths who don't qualify for the free lessons but who can't afford \$60 still won't learn how to swim.

POOR KIDS AT RISK

Such situations bother Pitts.

“Income is definitely tied to the probability of whether you’ll be swimming or not,” said Pitts, who also said that he’s had discussions with military officials who are alarmed at the numbers of minority enlistees who cannot swim.

“One of them [military officials] told me, ‘When they [minorities] go through boot camp, they’re failing swimming as if it’s another language they don’t know,’” he said.

That’s why Pitts said he believes that swimming pools shouldn’t just be accessible but that the lessons should be free for everyone.

Yet the only way for that to happen is for everyone to buy into the notion that being able to swim is a life-saving skill and not just an excuse for a bunch of poor youngsters to splash around in a pool.

As black youths continue to drown at triple the rate of white youths, it’s past time for that idea to be sold to the public.

To register for lessons through Waterproof Jacksonville, call (904) 255-7927 or go to tinyurl.com/lsobo2k.

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