

Exhibit Highlights History of & Challenges for African Americans and Water Safety

BY CONNIE HARVEY

Summer. It's the time when even the busiest of people shift their thoughts to rest and relaxation, moving to one place in particular. The water.

Whether it is the ocean, a lake or the local pool, the water has long been the solution that provides a respite from the summer's heat and humidity.

Nowhere has this been truer than the local municipal pool. For decades, the water has provided a means for people to cool off, socialize and, for most, swim.

And for more than a century, the American Red Cross has been behind the scenes providing training programs for both lifeguards and swimmers alike. This training helps people enjoy the water safely, no matter where they find it. But the experience has not been equal among all Americans.

That's why the Red Cross participated in the development of the museum exhibit that launched at Philadelphia's historic Kelly Pool at the Fairmount Water Works. Titled *POOL: A Social History of Segregation*, the exhibit tells the story of the historic importance of pools within Philadelphia. It also shares the history and importance of pools in the lives of African Americans in the City of Brotherly Love.

Told through photographs, films, first-hand stories and other historical tools, the 4,700-foot platform at this National Historic Landmark, built in 1898, examines the

historic and contemporary implications of segregated swimming in the United States, especially after World War II.

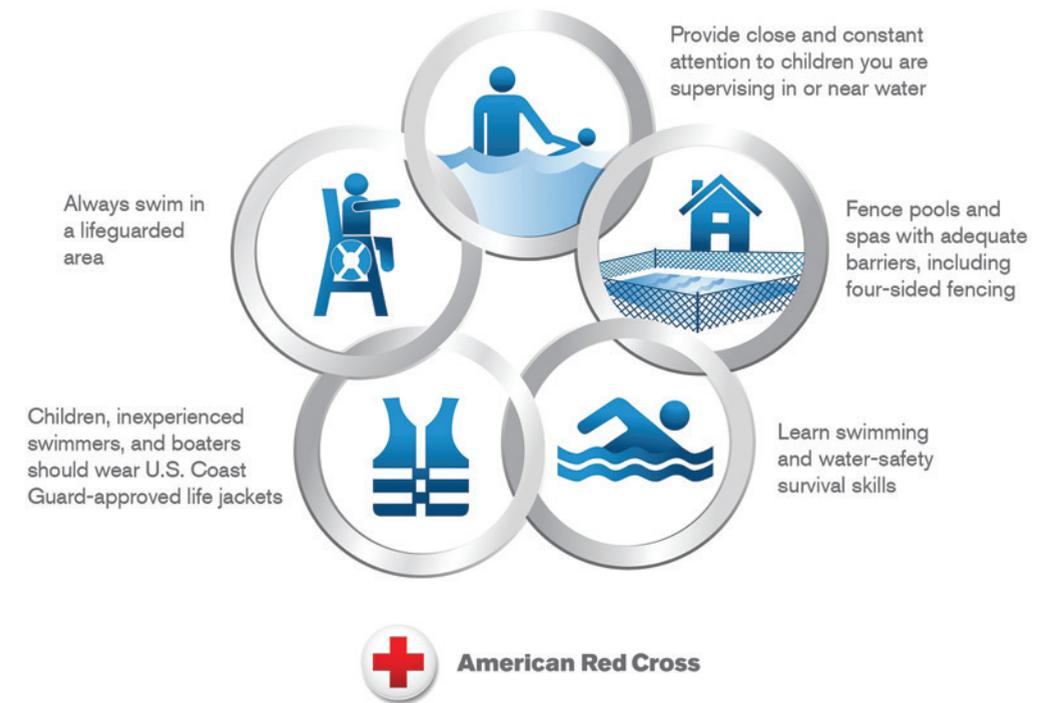
Many of the lessons learned from the exhibit were not surprising to experts who have examined the issue.

"I was not taught the history of swimming pools in the city," said Angela Beale-Tawfeeq, Ph.D., professor at Rowan University outside of Philadelphia and a member of the Red Cross Scientific Advisory Council, Aquatics Sub-council. "I learned as an adult that there is a long history involving African Americans and swimming. This exhibit captures a narrative that is inclusive of the historical connections of African Americans, civil rights, slavery and swimming. After all, we were a maritime people in Africa, having relationships to the oceans, seas and rivers."

Swimming is also an issue central to the Red Cross, which in 2014 upped its efforts to educate all Americans about swimming safety. It launched its Aquatics Centennial Campaign to honor the organization's 100th anniversary of adding drowning prevention to its mission. The campaign encouraged Americans to take swim lessons and otherwise improve water safety. Central to the campaign is increasing education to populations at greater risk of drowning, including African Americans.

Circle of Drowning Prevention

Layers of protection are essential to help prevent drowning. Plan ahead for aquatic activities:



One main concept—water competency—with three components is key to this effort. Water competency is a combination of knowing how to prevent drowning, having a basic set of water safety and swimming skills, and knowing what to do if something goes wrong.

The Red Cross Circle of Drowning Prevention is made up of five actions that all Americans, young and old, can take to reduce the chances that they experience a life-threatening situation due to a water-related accident. The links in the Circle of Drowning Prevention consist of:

- Provide close and constant attention to children you are supervising in or near water.
- Fence pools and spas with adequate barriers, including four-sided fencing.
- Learn swimming and water-safety survival skills.
- Children, inexperienced swimmers, and all boaters should wear U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jackets.
- Always swim in a lifeguarded area.

Always applying the links, or layers of protection, in the Circle can help reduce the chances that someone will find themselves in a situation where drowning is a possibility.

Water competency also entails having basic water safety and swimming skills. The Red Cross advocates five basic skills (in this sequence) that everyone should be able to perform:

1. Stepping into water over your head.
2. Returning to the surface, then treading water or floating for a minute to gather your bearings.
3. Turning around in a full circle to find an exit.
4. Swimming at least 25 yards to get to a safe exit.
5. Being able to get out of the water, including exiting without using the ladder if in a pool.

Being able to perform these skills in one environment, such as a pool, does not mean that they could be performed in another, such as a river with cold water and

“WE START WITH YOUNG CHILDREN, OPEN THE DOOR AND EXPOSE THEM,” SAID WILLIAM RAMOS, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR AT THE INDIANA UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND CHAIR OF THE RED CROSS SCIENTIFIC ADVISORY COUNCIL’S AQUATICS SUB-COUNCIL. “IT MAY START WITH LEARNING TO SWIM BUT OPENS THE CONVERSATION TO ‘I WANT TO LEARN TO SURF,’ ‘I WANT TO LEARN TO SCUBA DIVE,’ AND ‘I WANT TO ENJOY BOATING.’ ALL OF THESE OTHER ACTIVITIES OPEN UP THE GREAT BENEFITS AND ENJOYMENT OF WATER-BASED ACTIVITIES.”

a current or an ocean with waves. Children and adults should participate in swim lessons at least until they can achieve water competency in whatever environment they find themselves.

Even the most competent swimmers who follow all five actions in the Circle of Drowning Prevention could find themselves in a drowning emergency. That is where the Chain of Drowning Survival comes in, with these links:

- Recognize the signs someone is in trouble and shout for help.
- Rescue and remove the person from the water (without putting yourself in danger).
- Ask somebody to call emergency medical services (EMS). If alone, provide two minutes of care, then call EMS.
- Begin rescue breathing and CPR.
- Use an AED if available and transfer care to advanced life support.

Taken together, the Centennial Campaign, education on water competency, and the Circle and Chain have positively affected Americans’ attitudes toward swimming. More work, though, needs to be done to increase the comfort level and safety skills of African Americans with regards to water.

For example, a large majority of Americans know how to swim and the percentage of people who can swim has increased since 2014 (85 percent in 2020 compared to 81 percent in 2014). However, African Americans are significantly less likely to know how to swim compared to white Americans (61 percent vs. 89 percent) and the percentage of African Americans who said they knew how to swim actually dropped (from 70 percent in 2014 to 61 percent in 2020).

Those who do not know how to swim cite lack of access, fear, and lack of interest as top reasons why they never learned to swim as children. Not having an interest in swimming and fear are the primary obstacles for non-swimmers now that they are adults.

Experts agree that getting more African American children involved in swimming at a young age is key to increasing overall swimming knowledge in the African American community.

“We start with young children, open the door and expose them,” said William Ramos, associate professor at the Indiana University School of Public Health and chair of the Red Cross Scientific Advisory Council’s Aquatics Sub-council. “It may start with learning to swim but opens the conversation to ‘I want to learn to surf,’ ‘I want to learn to scuba dive,’ and ‘I want to enjoy boating.’ All of these other activities open up the great benefits and enjoyment of water-based activities.”

The goal of the Red Cross is to help close the gap around disparities and access to swimming. The organization is committed to building bridges and eliminating barriers in the African American community, thereby encouraging more parents to sign up their children, and themselves, for swim lessons and other water safety programs.

There is no better time than summer to make this happen.

Connie Harvey is the director of the Centennial Initiatives for Aquatics for the American Red Cross. She works daily to advance the Red Cross mission to prevent drowning with a focus on at-risk communities throughout the nation.

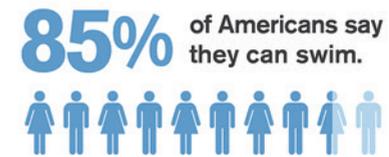
Chain of Drowning Survival

A person who is drowning has the greatest chance of survival if these steps are followed:

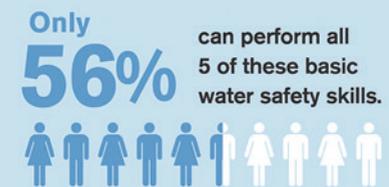


5 Skills to Save Your Life in the Water

Can you swim well enough to save your life?



But... only slightly more than half of Americans can perform all of the 5 basic skills that could save their life in the water.



1. Step or jump into the water over your head.
2. Return to the surface and float or tread water for one minute.
3. Turn around in a full circle and find an exit.
4. Swim 25 yards to the exit without stopping.
5. Exit from the water. If in a pool, be able to exit without using the ladder.

Source: Survey findings based on an online survey of 1,028 American adults conducted by the Red Cross on February 5–10, 2020