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Creating Hope and Experience

DR. ANGELA BEALE-TAWFEEQ

This article was excerpted with permission, from an original article written by Hadiyah Weaver for *The Philadelphia Citizen* publication.

When Dr. Angela Beale-Tawfeeq was 10 years old, she and her 11-year-old sister decided to try out for the Philadelphia Parks and Recreation Diving Team—without knowing how to dive.

“My sister said, ‘Dive in and flap your arms like a bird, and you’ll come up,’” says Beale-Tawfeeq, who hadn’t had a single swim lesson. “So that’s what I did.” To their delight, the sisters, natives of North Philadelphia, made the team.

Beale-Tawfeeq went on to be coached by Jim Ellis, the founder of PDR, a Black competitive swim team founded in 1972, earned an athletic scholarship to Howard University’s swimming and diving program, and earned a PhD in Physical Education Teacher Education. She’s now an associate professor and Chair of the Department of Science, Technology, Education, Arts and Mathematics at the College of Education at Rowan University, and a member of the American Red Cross’s Scientific Advisory Board. Beale-Tawfeeq serves as Director of Education and Research for Diversity In Aquatics, the

nation’s largest network of ethnically diverse aquatic professionals, practitioners, researchers, athletes, and enthusiasts, all working together to help save lives. The network’s focus is eliminating the drowning disparity among historically excluded and underrepresented communities and vulnerable populations.

But no matter how strong her skills became or how many accolades she accrued, that very first tryout—and her increased awareness of the dire need to enable more kids to swim—made Beale-Tawfeeq determined to help novel swimmers, particularly those in the city.

The Lack of Access to Swimming Pools has a Lethal Cause and Effect in Current Day Society

“The most important thing to provide is access,” Beale-Tawfeeq says. “The whole idea of exposure and opportunity, and not being told they can’t, lets kids know they can do anything they put their mind to.”

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According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, unintentional drowning among children between the ages of 1 and 14 is the second leading cause of death behind car crashes. For African American children between 5 and 14, the unintentional drowning rate is nearly six times greater than the rate for white children. A major problem within minority communities is the lack of access to swimming pools and swimming-related programs.

Beale-Tawfeeq mixes her personal history with the American history of pools, often referencing *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America*. The book, written by Jeff Wiltse, touches on how pools served as asylums for poor urban communities in the nineteenth century, whereas pools for the middle class were used for leisure. A majority of Philadelphians, specifically the poor, in the mid-1800s didn’t have indoor plumbing and weren’t able to afford bathhouses. They were often left with no other choice but to remain “dirty.” Wiltse says the social climate around swimming during this time reflected the tensions in American society.

The Realities of Social Injustice

“Pool use was divided along class lines—but not ethnic or racial lines—because city officials, reformers and the middle-class public viewed the working classes en masse as ‘the great unwashed,’” Wiltse writes. In response, reformers opened public bathhouses with the intention to provide working-class men and women a way to bathe; working-class males, however, had other motives—they began using the public baths for summer recreation.

Philadelphia was the most prolific early builder of municipal pools. The city operated nine pools in the late 1890s, six of which were located in economically deprived neighborhoods. Fast-forward to today, and the city oversees more than 70 indoor and outdoor swimming pools, though attendance at city pools isn’t as high as it was in the 1900s. The Inquirer reported

that in 1943, city pools admissions reached 4.3 million; in 2013, Philadelphia recorded less than a million swims.

Dr. Beale-Tawfeeq has plans to change that. She is devoted to increasing aquatic presence, awareness and economic strength in Philly. “As an African American female and physical education educator, I know the problems,” Beale-Tawfeeq says. “But I want to create hope, and solutions. And as a Delta woman,” Beale-Tawfeeq says, referring proudly to her sorority, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Incorporated, “when I see a problem, I find a solution.”

Creating Hope & Solutions

Beale-Tawfeeq has taught thousands of children water safety. She developed her own program, A Stroke in the Right Direction, to teach water safety and social responsibility to children in minority populations. It’s a continuation of a collaborative water safety education program she taught while at Adelphi University. Since 2017, A Stroke in the Right Direction has collaborated with Masjidullah, a mosque in Northwest Philadelphia, on a summer camp teaching the fundamentals of water safety. Beale-Tawfeeq has also teamed up with Brannen L. Johnson’s (BLJ) Community Rowing, the only all-female, African American-owned boathouse in the country to provide lessons to help Black female students become confident rowers, and help them qualify for college scholarships.

As Beale-Tawfeeq continues to tread forward, she hopes to emphasize water safety training as a way to not only teach swimming, but activate healthy and economically impactful ways of life for Black and brown children. “With DIA, we show the tree of life from learning to swim,” Beale-Tawfeeq stated. “One of the things we say is...Understanding the importance of learning how to swim can lead to a tree with many branches—into occupational opportunities, into school, but also saving life, lifesaving skills.”