

■ By Diane Krieger Spivak  
Special Splash Correspondent



PHOTO BY ALEXANDRA WAH

**A**rthur Lopez is an accomplished man.

An attorney for the United States Department of Transportation, in Washington, D.C., Lopez has worn many hats and sits on a number of boards and committees. But of all the endeavors he has set out upon, one is particularly dear to his heart.

Two and a half years ago, Lopez founded Nadar Por Vida, "Swimming for Life," the outreach program of the Curl-Burke Swim Club in Damascus, Md.

The 25 to 45 mostly Hispanic swimmers are, by and large, labeled at-risk children by government standards and very poor. They come from all over the world— mostly El Salvador, Venezuela and Brazil, but also Sudan, Ethiopia and other countries.

But Nadar is not just about swimming, Lopez says.

"Swimming is the vehicle by which we're trying to achieve much, much more," he said. "The mission is to get the kids on USA Swimming, but it's also about assimilation."

Lopez knows where these kids are coming from. A first-generation Mexican-American, he got where he is the hard way.

"My father was illegal, an alcoholic," said Lopez. "I failed seventh grade and was supposed to have been sent to a reformatory. I graduated at the bottom of my class."

Lopez turned his life around, earned a bachelor's degree in elementary education ("Basically, so I could learn everything I missed in school") and at 29, was accepted to the Indiana University School of Law.



PHOTO BY M. ALBERTO

# NADAR POR SWIM for

With a long history of civil rights experience, Lopez, as Nadar's main coach, uses his own background as a springboard, peppering swim lessons between sets with talks about staying in school, overcoming prejudice, racism, language barriers and more.

"We teach them to learn how to have goals," he said. "While they're getting their breath in between swimming, I'll teach them about why education is important to their lives, and that the Civil Rights movement was not just about blacks, it's about browns and everybody else."

The idea for Nadar Por Vida came about while Lopez was serving on a committee with Holmes Middle School guidance counselor Yolma Torres.

Lopez arranged for the water at a local YMCA, and Torres recruited swimmers. In fact, 80 percent of Nadar Por Vida's members attend Holmes, in the Fairfax County school system.

Torres, says Lopez, "is like Mother Teresa."

"These kids don't have food, and she makes sure they get some," he said. "She runs clothing drives. She drives them to and from the pool. She's always there for them and their families. She goes to their homes to establish a connection."

Torres brings a carload of kids to practice with her every Friday night, as do other Holmes faculty and staff.

Nadar meets on Friday nights because that's the time when kids are most likely to get in trouble in Fairfax County, Torres says.

"My students tell me gang members and high school kids ask them to smoke cigarettes, drink beer and do many things that are wrong," Torres said. "But they want to be out on a Friday night. They don't want to have to stay home."

Parents are also invited to swim practice, although many work two and three jobs. For those who are able to attend, it's a chance to watch their children learn swimming skills and a place to gather socially. It's also an opportunity for Torres to speak to parents who might not be inclined to come to school meetings or events.

"I talk to parents about absenteeism, good grades and goals," she said. She also gives them referrals to different social service agencies and talks about social issues like child abuse.

"The program is important not only for the kids but for the community," Torres said.

Torres recruited counselors, teachers and other staff from Holmes to help out.

Some, along with Curl-Burke swimmers and swimmers from other local swim clubs, coach, and some volunteer in other ways like record keeping and serving as translators.

Torres also approached Holmes resource officer Traci Sontheimer, a former high school swimmer and a Fairfax County Police scuba diver. "I got into the pool with the kids and loved it," Sontheimer said. "From then on I was hooked."

Sontheimer comes to practice in her squad car, and not only coaches but also acts as good-will ambassador between police, families and the community.

"We're trying not only to improve their swimming skills but also to get them to a point where they can go out for their high school swim team and not be

"Kids involved in sports are kids who are less likely to hang out on the street," Sontheimer said. "And if you're in sports, you've got to keep your grades up to compete."

"We have high expectations for the kids in the program," Torres said. "We monitor their work and encourage them not to be late for classes and to do their homework. They take pride in what they do, and teachers have seen a difference."

So has Holmes Principal Roberto Pamas, who found a way to secure a large portion of funding for Nadar Por Vida through grants as an after-school program.

"We have seen a tremendous amount of improvement in their academic success, and a turnaround in student discipline," Pamas said. "It's a positive reinforcement program."

Students must maintain a C average, and meet tardiness and suspension regulations to participate. Those who don't must attend a study hall manned by the coaches who tutor them on a one-to-one basis to improve their grades so they can still participate in the program.

"It's easy to support a wonderful program like that," Pamas said

"It was important to be a part of the Curl-Burke Swim Team because my kids are so mobile, when they show up someplace else, when they show the cap with the Curl-Burke seal, everybody knows it," Lopez said.

Curl-Burke is one of USA Swimming's largest and most well-known clubs, with 1,000 members.

"Once they saw how successful Nadar was, they let us use the Curl seal," Lopez said. "We modified it and put Nadar Por Vida, on the caps."

At the beginning, Nadar used donated suits, goggles and equipment from

several different swim teams. "Now, as soon as a new child comes in, we put them in a new suit," Lopez said. Swimmers who stick with the program for two sessions are given jackets with their names on them, and a Nadar patch.

Jose Romero's sons Kevin, 12, and Edwin, 15, have been swimming with Nadar Por Vida for two years.

"It's surprising how the kids listen to (Lopez) when he's talking," Romero said. "When we get home, we start talking about what he talks about at practice."

"I have a great time," Kevin said. "When I swim, I just let everything go. Mr. Lopez has a speech every week. It encourages me to do better in school, and prepares kids for any of life's challenges they may encounter."

"I get a good workout, and it gives me something positive to do," Edwin said. "I think it's really good for him to talk to the kids like that because in the world we live in today, the kids need motivation."

"It gives them opportunities, and sometimes all they need is a chance," Jose's wife Marisol said.

USA Swimming's director of program development Pat Hogan recently visited Nadar Por Vida's program with fellow USA Swimming staffer Tom Avischious.

"We were blown away," said Hogan, who coached club swimming for 30 years. "It was one of the most impressive things I think I've ever seen in swimming. Here you have a program that not one person involved with it is being paid for the services they provide. Arthur has done a magnificent job of putting this together."

"It's a great model for what we would like to recreate in different parts of the country and see happen a lot more often," said Hogan. "Through the sport of swimming, there's a group of people there who are doing a heck of a lot of good."

# VIDA

## LIFE

embarrassed," Sontheimer said. That's important, she says, because Fairfax County middle schools offer no athletic programs. "A lot of these kids don't understand the equipment, proper suits and drills."

"There can be a thousand kids trying out for teams in high school," Lopez said. "They're laughed at. Not only don't they come back, but they won't go out for anything in high school."

Nadar invites Annandale High School swim coaches to come out to talk to the kids about being on the team, and what's required of them.

