

DIVERSITY SUMMIT Colorado Springs

The first Annual Diversity Summit was held the weekend October 26 – 28, 2007 at the US Olympic Training Center. Talks and presentations were held Friday evening, all day Saturday, and early Sunday morning. Also in attendance from PVS were Arthur Lopez, who was also a presenter, and Solomon Robinson.

The Summit kicked off with a welcome from Bill Maxson. John Cruzat, Diversity Specialist, followed up with additional welcoming remarks and his enthusiasm about where USA Swimming was headed. The first few presentations were more motivational and inspiration than actual substance in terms of what the goals were, what's been tried, and what changes can be made for improvement.

Jim Ellis gave an excellent talk with a historical perspective, with his experiences growing up. He told of how when he went for tryouts for the varsity swim team he was directed to the basketball court. He repeated himself and said he was interested in trying out for the swim team. The coach, though surprised, asked if he could swim. The answer, of course, was yes. A brief tryout followed which involved him being put against a girl on the team. After soundly beating her, Jim says he looked at the coach and said with a big smile, "I guess I'm on the team, huh coach?"

Saturdays' presentations involved more substance about the make up and organization of various programs throughout the country and how they have been successful. It appeared that programs that had a high percentage of diversity didn't necessarily have any game plan that attracted their range of backgrounds. It seemed, rather, that they were beneficiaries of location. There were better odds of recruiting and retaining kids in areas where they could either ride their bikes or walk to pools. Gainis Wright works with Ft Lauderdale Aquatics and worked hard to get one of the local pools re-opened. Apparently, one of the earlier solutions when the coach made attempts at running a swim program was to provide buses to the Hall of Fame pool. Gainis, the coach, vehemently rejected the idea because it was too much of a throwback to the days of segregation and busing to integrate schools. There have been occasions when kids walking by have thrown rocks at swimmers during practice.

I think it's hard for folks in the Washington Metro area to relate because we have a ton of pools, both indoor and outdoor. Needless to say, the number one obstacle to learning how to swim is swimming pool access.

The most inspiring presentation was made by a lady named Wanda Butts. She lost her 16 year old son to a drowning accident in a rafting excursion with friends. Hearing her speak, the initial feeling was this was something that happened years ago, only to find out the drowning happened in August of 2006. She contacted the USA Swimming office that November, searching for any information on learn-to-swim programs and how she could get involved. The Josh Project was initiated out of this tragedy. Her sole drive was to prevent another parent from suffering her same sorrow. Make A Splash is another program aimed at teaching children to be safe in the water, creating opportunities within the community for children, and for fitness. The program can be easily identified by a water drop.

There were a few presentations that were given in the category of Diverse Clubs that work. As I said earlier, I'm not sure if they work because of some program organizational structure or that these clubs were located in largely diverse regions. It seemed the critical force was a coaching staff determined to develop a program, without regard to the ethnicity of the swimmers. Arthur Lopez gave a talk on Nadar Por Vida. He noted that in his case his goal was to teach underprivileged children to swim, and then move them through his program on to competitive year round clubs. All his coaches are in the water at every practice. Everyone wears a team suit and cap, which gives all swimmers the same identity and brings them together as a group. Arthur also gave many thanks to CUBU and Potomac Valley Swimming for their assistance in getting his program off the ground.

I think the bigger battle we face is with other sports. There is an overwhelming abundance of exposure to football, baseball, soccer, and basketball. Swimming appears every four years (with random sightings of other events now and then) then goes away again. When we do highlight our sport, it's the best of the best. If the limited exposure we do provide for our sport is that of Michael Phelps training every day for four years with no break, how on earth can we expect to attract kids?

Yet, the above mentioned sports have every play, every interview, every fart, every stupid comment made running on the news, on ESPN, on the web, etc. Let's see, Kate Ziegler broke one of the oldest world records (set by one of the greatest distance swimmers ever) earlier this year. Did it make any of the news reels?

The question raised by the Summit was what each person could take back to their LSC and / or club to further the efforts of diversity swimming.

In our area, I don't know that the problem is opportunity. Lack of exposure and competition with other sports is what we face. There are countless lesson programs throughout the area. Our goal should be to bridge the gap between the end of lessons and the entry level swim team member. This is something all clubs can do.

After attending the summit and giving thought to the whole topic of diversity, the process involves three steps;

- 1) Exposure to the sport
- 2) Opportunity, which begins with swim lessons
- 3) Encouraging kids to reach higher by joining a swim team to **continue** learning

Exposure, without a doubt, is the primary method of not only increasing diversity but increasing membership in the sport. We then need to stress that competitive swimming is the next 'level' of the learn-to-swim program.

Manga Dalizu