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Portable pool brings swim lessons to kids

Brenda Rindge

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METRO – Swim instructor Allan Dapore gives a pep talk to Jane Edwards first grader Jefferey Perez-Ventura before the boy swims without a life vest for the first time. (Brenda Rindge/staff) [Buy this photo](#)



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EDISTO ISLAND — "Zion! The star swimmer! Evelyn! Good job!"

Jane Edwards Elementary School lead teacher Mary Hanson praises each of the first-graders by name as she helps them scale a ladder to exit a portable pool in the school parking lot.

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Previously, Zion Brown and many of his schoolmates didn't know how to swim, and that put them at risk. Statistics show that the chances of drowning are three times higher in rural areas, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

But some community leaders on Edisto hope to change that. On May 20, every student at Jane Edwards started 30-minute swim lessons that will be held for the last two weeks of school.

"They live on an island," Hanson said. "They should know how to swim, but there really was no opportunity before this. So many of them were afraid of the water. If nothing else, at least they aren't afraid anymore."

Even though they are surrounded by water, many of the children have never taken swim lessons. The nearest public pool is about 35 miles away, in Charleston. That's inconvenient, but for many families, money and transportation are an issue, too.

"We took our kids to swim lessons in West Ashley a couple of years ago, but it's such a long drive into town," said parent Nick Lindsay, who lives on the marsh with access to deep water. "I think it's important for them to learn how to swim. The creeks have a huge tide and the ocean is pretty intense. It can be dangerous but yet a lot of people on Edisto grow up not knowing how to swim."

Recently, some folks on Edisto realized, if you can't take the kids to the pool, bring the pool to them.

"This just shows what happens when you think out of the box," said Steve Austin, who headed up an effort to teach Edisto's children to swim.

The portable pool program, the first of its kind in the state, was born after a failed attempt to use a nearby private resort pool for lessons. That program was canceled just days before it was to begin, leaving Austin feeling like he had to find a solution.

"The whole issue of swimming kept popping up, and I thought we'd better do something serious about it," said Austin, a part-time resident of Edisto and a board member of the nonprofit Community Services of Edisto.

After some research, he learned that Los Angeles and San Diego have used portable pools to teach lessons since the mid-1960s. He spoke to directors of those programs, and realized the concept would work here.

The pieces quickly fell into place:

Community Services raised about \$11,000 — by word of mouth alone — to pay for materials. Labor was donated by the Chicago metal fabrication company from which Austin is retired.

Aqua Blue Pools agreed to be the licensed contractor of record for free. They provided design assistance, prepared documents and submitted the application to the state Department of Health and Environmental Control for construction and operation. They also designed and installed the pool's pump equipment.

Charleston County Park and Recreation Commission, which recently has started teaching Swim Lessons University through a partnership with Lowcountry Aquatics Project Swimming, agreed to take ownership of the pool and run the program.

Charleston County School District volunteered locations for it to be set up.

LAPS, which also teaches Charleston County students at several other locations, trained the instructors and provided life vests, swim caps and other equipment.

"It was a group of people all essentially doing this because they thought it was really important," Austin said. "I never heard anybody, either in the partnership group or anybody that I was soliciting for money, say it was not a good idea. They understood right away."

The California cities use pools built nearly 50 years ago, so construction plans did not exist. In addition, they are out of date on water-treatment and safety issues, Austin said.

Working only from photos, he designed a pool specifically for elementary-aged kids that's 16 feet by 24 feet, holds 7,200 gallons of water and is about 2½ feet deep.

It is made of a steel frame, plywood sides with a vinyl liner and has end-mounted kick bars, a pump and filter, and a lockable metal cover. Assembling and filling it takes about five hours.

PRC plans to move the pool to Schroder Middle School in Hollywood in June and Angel Oak Elementary on Johns Island in July, giving lessons to about 100 kids at camps at each site, said Steven Fernandez, safety program assistant manager for PRC.

Lessons are taught by a five-man crew that includes a lifeguard, an overseer and three instructors, who each work with a group of up to six children.

"Swim Lessons University is a great program, and since LAPS was already teaching it to Charleston County students, we decided to teach the same thing so that it would be consistent for all school kids," said Fernandez. PRC also taught the program to Murray Lasaine Elementary students at Splash Zone.

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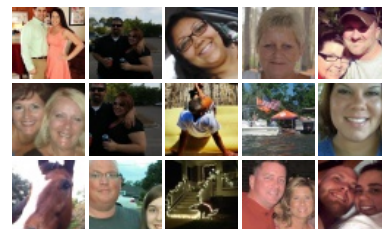
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Those involved have intentionally started small with the program, but they hope it will expand to other areas in the years to come. County officials also have their eye on the Awendaw area.

Austin hopes that when they hear about the program, other community leaders will be encouraged to follow his footsteps.

"Once you get over the mechanical hurdles of how to move a pool, it really is a great model," he said.

Reach Brenda Rindge at 937-5713 or www.facebook.com/brindge.

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