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Young adults with special needs get free swim lessons this summer



YMCA swim instructor Jeff Burgazzoli, left, teaches Alphonso Richard how to swim during his first swim lesson.

TAIMY ALVAREZ / SOUTH FLORIDA SUN SENTINEL

By Austen Erblat

South Florida Community News

Summer has officially begun in South Florida and with the higher temperatures and increased rain comes a rise in drownings, according to data from the state. Three organizations are coming together to provide free swimming lessons for young adults with developmental disorders. A partnership between the YMCA of South Palm Beach County's Water Smart program, Legal Aid Society of Palm Beach County and Sunrise-based developer GL Homes is offering the free lessons through the summer for people with autism spectrum disorders, cerebral palsy, traumatic experiences or other challenges.

Liz Schmidt, director of community water safety at the YMCA of South Palm Beach County, says the program brings attention to two issues in Palm Beach County.

"One is the lack of critical resources to individuals who have special needs in our community, especially around water safety issues," she said.

"A lot of individuals with special needs grow up without access to quality swim lesson programs and so we're really shedding a light on our programs that we are able to provide in the community. In addition to that, as young adults with special needs, there's just a lack and a big gap of access to programs."

The pool inside the DeVos-Blum Family YMCA's facility in Boynton Beach has sections roped off for different age groups, activities and special needs. In the section for young adults, stairs and handrails with a slip-prevention safety grip lead to a section with pool floats of varying shapes and sizes.

"Our aquatics facility is set up to be able to work with multi-generations, people of all needs and disabilities," Schmidt said.

"I think the biggest myth out there is that for adult lessons is that they'll be placed in lessons with kids, and that's not true. Our program is exclusively for adults and so they'll be taught by an adult, in a lesson with an adult. We're not going to stick them in the kids' swim lessons, but we'll also work with them. We know adults come to us with fears; a lot of them may have had a non-fatal drowning in their life or they've had traumatic incidents around drown-

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ing and we understand that so we're going to be working with them on those fears."

The Legal Aid Society of Palm Beach County established the Guardian Advocacy Program in 2010 with funding from the county and provides services for people who are developmentally disabled or have special needs.

"We've been working with GL Homes a little while now and they sponsor us to do certain activities with our adults to get them out in the community," said Jessica Kelson, case manager for the Guardian Advocacy Program.

"This was something that was necessary because we actually have some that don't know how to swim but

live in a home with a pool on the property or very nearby."

The students are from all over Palm Beach County, mostly between the ages of 21 and 27 and can participate in a wide range of activities offered through the partnership.

"GL Homes takes this group of developmentally disabled young adults on experiential trips — we've taken them to golf, we've taken them bowling, a shopping spree at Stein Mart," said Sarah Alsofrom, director of community relations for GL Homes.

She said the trips aim to promote physical activity as well as things like arts, budgeting, cooking and nutrition.

Visit YMCASPBC.org or call 561-738-9622.



TAIMY ALVAREZ / SOUTH FLORIDA SUN SENTINEL PHOTOS

YMCA swim instructors **Jeff Burgazzoli, right** and **Cheryl Whitehurst** work with five developmentally disabled young adults taking their first swimming lessons, thanks to GL Homes' partnership with Legal Aid Society of Palm Beach County and the Palm Beach County YMCA's Water Smart program.



YMCA swim instructor **Cheryl Whitehurst** helps **Esther Philemon** learn how to float during her first swimming lessons as part of the Palm Beach County YMCA's Water Smart program.

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