

Evanston Review

Evanston 150 program going swimmingly so far

By BOB SEIDENBERG | bseidenberg@pioneerlocal.com

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Seth Weidmann, left, of the YWCA Evanston/North Shore, and Hardy Murphy, superintendent of School District 65, join Pam James whose Evanston 150 Water, Water Everywhere group conceived the idea of teaching water safety to local children.

EVANSTON — Mirelle Bialleres joined about 30 other youngsters at the YWCA Evanston/North Shore Oct. 3, preparing to take part in a first-time swim instruction and water-safety program.

Was she looking forward to the program?

“I am really nervous,” the second-grader said, repeating the statement for a second time before heading with other classmates to the water-safety instruction class designed to allay those fears.

Second-graders at District 65’s Oakton, Dawes and Washington Schools were receiving free swimming and water-safety instruction at the YWCA, 1215 Church St. in one of the first tangible goals to bubble to the surface from last year’s Evanston 150 process.

Evanston 150 is the community-wide initiative that engaged community members in a nearly year- long process, resulting in 10 visionary ideas to celebrate the city’s 150th anniversary next year.

Teaching all Evanston youngsters the basics of water safety and how to swim grew out of one of Evanston 150’s committees: the Water, Water Everywhere Committee.

Committee members are set on teaching water safety, citing the prevalence of drowning among young people.

Drowning ranks fifth among the leading cause of unintentional death among young people, according to statistics from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

According to the CDC, one in five people who die from drowning are children 14 and younger.

With Evanston right on the lake, committee members made water-safety instruction a high priority.

Pam James, chairman of the Water, Water Everywhere Committee, stood at the edge of the pool alongside District 65 Superintendent Hardy Murphy whose district is a partner in the program, watching the first class.

“It’s very, very satisfying to see kids having fun, learning a life-saving skill,” said James. “This is something we can do as a community that’s proactive, that keeps our kids safe.”

Murphy expressed appreciation that District 65 could take part in the program.

“When Pam came to me with the idea we felt it resonated with us because it made our students and the school district part of the partnership of making the vision happen,” he said.

Besides, noted Murphy, here was an opportunity to partner with the YWCA’s famous Flying Fish program which nurtures swimmers from beginner to champion-caliber level.

At the Oct. 3 session the second-grade boys and girls took turns participating in the water-safety classes and actual sessions in the pool.

Children bring with them different comfort levels about water, said Jeanette Hollingsworth, aquatics director at the McGaw YMCA which is also a partner in the program.

Hollingsworth said she fielded a call from one parent who told her that her child had been crying at the prospect of taking part in the program.

“A degree of anxiety is healthy to an extent,” she said.

She added: “There should be a level of caution when you’re around water. That’s part of swim safety.”

On the other hand, Hollingsworth and other instructors are striving for the young swimmers to “be comfortable enough” so they can deal with different swimming situations and remain safe.

Hollingsworth had children coloring in pictures in a safe swimming handbook and she stressed the basics of water safety, including being on guard when near any body of water.

“It’ll be interesting when they go to the pool how (this) will translate for them,” she said as the class was breaking up and the children were getting ready for the pool session.

It translated well, based on the splashing, the smiling faces and the rapport between the children and their volunteer instructors, members of the Flying Fish program.

Cath Carpenter cradled Quintin Ware, 7, wearing blue goggles, teaching him to relax and float on his back.

Meanwhile, Mirelle Bialleres stood in water at one end of the pool, not showing the least of the worries she carried into the session.

“Really cool,” was her response to how she was enjoying herself

“I can float on my back,” she said, performing a kind of 360-degree pirouette in the water that any Flying Fish member would be proud of.