

# IMPACT MAKER



**2016 \$100,000 Grant Recipient**

**YMCA's WaterSmart Community Initiative**

By Sandi Schwartz

Knowing how to swim can save a life. Palm Beach County ranks third in the nation for drownings, with about 50 occurring each year. Sadly, many of these are young children. Florida loses more children under the age of five to drowning than any other state in the country. Even more shocking is that over half of drowning accidents are within 10 feet of an adult.

The YMCA of South Palm Beach County's WaterSmart Community Initiative helps save these children. In 2016, Impact 100 awarded a grant to the YMCA for their effective program that involves swimming lessons and land-based safety education throughout South Palm Beach County, including part or full financial assistance for underserved communities.

The goal of Watersmart is to help reverse the high drowning and death rate in our community. Not only does the initiative save lives, but it also provides participants with the healthy, enjoyable lifelong skill of swimming. Many of the children from underserved populations would otherwise not have the opportunity to learn how to swim due to multi-generational fear or lack of resources.

Francheska Delagdo-Rivera, South Grade Elementary Afterschool Director, sent in the following testimonial about how valuable the program is: "The kids LOVED the swim lessons and looked forward to all our field trips there. When we started in June, it was the first time some of these kids had ever seen a pool. Now these same kids are passing swim tests at the waterpark and jumping off diving boards with 15-foot-deep water! It's incredible to see their growth over the summer. Thank you!"

The YMCA oversees the initiative and partners with various organizations throughout the county—such as the city of Boynton Beach, Drowning Prevention Coalition, and Fuller Center—to offer swim lessons and water education at over 15 pools. During the two-year grant period between May 2016 and April 2018, over 10,000 children enjoyed eight half-hour drowning prevention swimming lessons. Additionally, over 15,000 people received water safety information in a classroom setting or at a health fair or community event.

Libby Moon, YMCA's Drowning Prevention Coordinator and co-chair of Watersmart, is grateful for Impact 100's support.

*"We received the grant in 2016 and truly that was the foundation for what we do now. We are extremely thankful for the opportunity. We have been able to provide year-round swim lessons for two-year-olds all the way up to people in their eighties."*

Also, through connections made because of this grant, Watersmart has built relationships with area non-profits and been recognized as a leader in drowning prevention initiatives in the state. They were one of three YMCA's in the state awarded \$100,000 through Florida Blue Foundation to continue their efforts. Funding has also been secured from Boca Regional Hospital Foundation, Sun Capital Partners, Step into Swim, USA Swimming, among others.

Watersmart also has an adaptive aquatics program for children and adults with special needs like autism, down syndrome, and cerebral palsy. Libby is proud of this program, as the ultimate goal is inclusion. "Our adaptive aquatics lessons have grown significantly. We now offer group adaptive swim lessons that focus on safety first, swim second."

The group lessons allow for more people to have swim lessons and are very popular. "We have a waitlist of over 50 students. These classes are helpful because they allow the students and their parents to have a supportive social outlet and a community to talk about different resources."

Another important aspect of this initiative is the widespread outreach and media campaigns. The "Be Watersmart" booklet is available in multiple languages and given out at hospitals, schools, doctor offices, and community centers to educate the public about water safety. It is estimated that they have reached nearly half a million residents in the county through messaging via print, social media, and television news.

Libby highlights what makes Watersmart so special.

*"It is unique because it is all completely free to the students. The entire program is grant-based. Our goal is to keep the funding coming in to be able to provide as many swim lessons as possible—hopefully at least 1,000 lessons each summer, and we are trying to grow that number."*

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