

‘The water saved my life’

Competitive swimming at PCHS, the Carver Center helps students build skills for work and life

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Though she’d never swum competitively before, Port Chester High School Class of 2023 graduate Madeline Saunders joined the school’s swim team on a whim as a freshman.

In her first swim meet, she said it took her more than 90 seconds to complete the 50-meter freestyle race, but by the time she was a sophomore, her time dropped to about 30 seconds. In her junior and senior years, she got even better—trimming her time to just 27 seconds.

In ways big and small, aquatics have done more than encouraged students to glide quicker in the water. The sport, as an education, has provided young swimmers with opportunities for summer jobs, careers and has helped them acquire skills that will stick with them for life.

This Fall, Saunders’s hard work will have paid off and she will attend Western Connecticut State University where she will compete on the school’s swimming and diving team.

While on the Port Chester team, Saunders set three schoolwide records.

As a member of the 200-yard medley relay team, Saunders helped set a record of 2:26.47. Likewise, she helped the 200-yard freestyle relay team set a record of 2:08.99. For the 100-yard breaststroke event, she set a new school record of 1:27.24.

At her first swim meet, Saunders said she volunteered to swim the 500-meter freestyle race simply because the team didn’t have anyone else in the event.

“I thought it was 10 laps, not 20,” she said. “I sprinted it and I struggled, and my teammates were pushing me to finish. After that swim meet, I decided to work on my 500 and keep swimming it. It just became my little goal.”

“I think swimming naturally attracts the kids who want to do better and want to goal set,” said Colleen Cahill, coach of the Port Chester High School girls’ swim team. “Its nature is goal setting and achieving those goals. Whether they’re high achieving socially or academically, those are the kids we get.”

At the start of her junior year in high school, Saunders began working as a lifeguard at the Rye YMCA. Then that winter, she received her certification to teach swimming lessons as well. While she plans on studying business in college, she would like to continue teaching swimming during breaks from school.

Cases like that of Saunders are familiar to Chief Program Officer Daniel Bonnet and Aquatics Director Cortney Grant at the Carver Center, where the high school swim team practices and competes.

“We’re focusing on training the kids that are in high school and giving them the opportunity to join the swim team,” Bonnet said. “The most interesting part is we’re teaching the young people to swim but (many of) their parents do not know how to swim.”

“We’re trying to change the culture of swimming and change the face of swimming,” Grant said. “As well as giving the youth an essential life skill. There’s a lot of opportunity to build, especially with the lifeguard shortage across the country.”

The Carver Center has seen many students come in with rudimentary swimming abilities who have gone on to find viable work after developing their skills—becoming lifeguards and instructors.

According to Grant, about half of the students in the Carver Center’s swim program have gone on to receive their lifeguard certification.

“It’s great money at a young age,” he said. “It can be year-round, which can lead to getting your Water Safety Instructor certification to be a swim instructor. There’s a lot of opportunity in aquatics—lifeguarding is just an entry level. I want the youth to see you can have a career in aquatics that is feasible at a young age.”

The swimming and first aid skills learned in a lifeguard class aren’t just important for earning money, Grant said, they’re crucial life skills, too.

“I think it’s important that these young people know how to do CPR or use an automated external defibrillator in case of an emergency. That’s something the Black and Brown community lacks—the knowledge of doing CPR and what you do with that,” he said. “Knowing that at a young age might help them save someone in their household or school. I think pushing that initiative with health and wellness is a great asset for a lot of these youth to have under their belt.”

Grant himself credits learning to swim and becoming a lifeguard as a teenager with changing his life.

“The water saved my life,” he said.

Before he became a lifeguard in his youth, Grant said he was kicked out of Mount St. Michaels Academy in the Bronx and transferred to Nelson Mandela High School.

“It was the last resort before you go to GED school, and during that interim is when I learned how to be a lifeguard,” Grant said.

Surprisingly for an aquatics director, Grant didn’t learn how to swim until he was 17 years old. All his friends were lifeguards, he said, and they encouraged him to become one, too. So, he joined the Yonkers YMCA to take swim lessons and a lifeguard certification class.

“It started out as a two-week class. The first day was so bad and I tried to mock what I saw with the other kids, and they had to give me oxygen. The normal class was two weeks, but I had to spend extra

time learning the strokes and getting my stamina and endurance up,” he said. “Six months later, I got my lifeguard certification. It led me down a path of aquatics.”

“It could have been a whole different ballgame,” Bonnet reflected on Grant’s story. “Especially as a young man of color.”

According to Cahill, the Port Chester High School swim team mirrors the school’s demographics as a minority-majority team. Some students are supported financially to be on the team, as it can be an expensive sport that is made accessible through the high school.

She added that a lot of students on the team may not be “athletes in other areas of life,” but join because they enjoy being in the water.

One student, Cahill said, managed to graduate high school because they participated on the swim team. The student had issues with homelessness and struggled with attendance. But if they wanted to compete in swim meets, Cahill said they had to be registered at school on the same day as practice. With the motivation to participate in practices, that student met the minimum required days to graduate.

“It really does save lives,” Cahill said.