

Touting parent involvement, respect for water buoys Hubbard Family Swim School

Georgann Yara, Special for The Republic Published 6:00 a.m. MT Nov. 8, 2018



For National EMS Week, reporter Rebekah Sanders takes a lesson in hands-only CPR from AMR paramedics in the azcentral studio. Hannah Gaber/azcentral.com



(Photo: Mark Henle/The Republic)

Over the past 20 years, thousands of parents have given Bob Hubbard, co-owner of Hubbard Family Swim School, a variety of reasons for bringing their children to the school he and his wife, Kathy, started in 1998.

Most, as expected, just want their sons and daughters to be able to swim and play safely in or around the pool, lake or beach. Others wish to foster a natural talent or love for the sport.

But sometimes, more than Hubbard would like, another event has brought a distraught parent to him.

"I have parents come to me after a child drowns or nearly drowns," said Hubbard, who talked about a preschooler who recovered after a month in intensive care after falling into a pool. "We have the ability to also expose parents to water safety and I feel like we're doing important work there, too."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 10 people drown each day in the United States and more than one in five fatal drowning victims are children younger than 14.

However, formal swimming lessons reduces the likelihood of childhood drowning by 88 percent, according to Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine. This is where the Hubbards' passion aims to make an impact.

The couple have been educating children and their parents in swimming and water safety long before they opened their first location in Phoenix in 1999.



Brooke Adams works with her daughter, Tallulah Adams, 1, during Little Snapper swim lessons on Oct. 29, 2018, at Hubbard Family Swim School in Phoenix. (Photo: Mark Henle/The Republic)

Creating a welcoming environment

In the early 1990s, Hubbard managed the Phoenix Swim Club after retiring from a career as a lawyer in the corporate world. He got involved in teaching swimming when the club expanded its programs. A native of Brooklyn, he spent summers as a youth in Breezy Point, Queens, as a lifeguard.

Kathy was an accomplished swimmer who swam competitively throughout college. She taught their eight children to swim. She also got involved with the Phoenix Swim Club.

"We've always been aquatic but when we started teaching to make money for the (club's) competitive program, we found we loved it," Hubbard said.

They yearned to venture out on their own and after leaving the club, the couple launched their swim school. They spent the first year raising enough money by giving lessons wherever they could to fund that first location.

"Backyards, health clubs ... we called ourselves the guerrilla swim teachers," Hubbard said.



Jared Uher works with his daughter, Adeline Uher, 1, during Little Snapper swim lessons on Oct. 29, 2018, at Hubbard Family Swim School in Phoenix. (Photo: Mark Henle/The Republic)

They built their initial facility that at the time, Hubbard said, people weren't used to: an indoor pool heated to 90 degrees that could be used year-round, a friendly 4-foot depth, tiles on floors and walls, nice changing rooms and a lobby with a snack bar. Parents of students 2½ years and younger were encouraged to join them in the water, creating a unique bond of trust and mutual education.

"When we opened, we knew what we were doing. We created a welcoming environment," Hubbard said.

Since then, they have expanded to include locations in Peoria and Mesa, with a fourth slated to open in Goodyear in the spring.

Hubbard Family Swim School started with 200 students in the first couple of months. Today, they teach 6,000 kids ages 2 months to 13 years old per week among their three locations, Hubbard said. About 70 percent of students are ages 7 and younger. Some have been with them for 13 years or gone on to competitive teams.

A Baby Splash class for ages 2 to 6 months gives future swimmers a head start. The 30-minute sessions get babies acclimated to the water along with their parents, and offers tips on enjoying tub time at home and preparation for swim lessons. It also teaches kids pool safety by watching and being around their parents. Aside from a \$25 registration fee, the classes are free.



"Just watching the kids blossom ... we see the kid that's nervous coming in and two weeks later, they stride in and feel comfortable," says Bob Hubbard (seen with wife Kathy Hubbard). "We believe kids love the water and it gives them self-confidence." (Photo: Mark Henle/The Republic)

Water-safety skills and self-confidence

Tara Nowak's three children, ages 14, 7 and 21 months, have attended or continue to attend Hubbard's Phoenix location. Her oldest started at age 4 and attended until age 12. Her middle child started at age 1, and her youngest at 4 months. Her two youngest continue to take year-round lessons and are advancing quickly, Nowak said.

The consistency of year-round lessons has given her children more confidence in the water than their peers who don't swim throughout the year, Nowak explained. They also demonstrate restraint from behaviors such as quickly jumping into pools and unpredictable – and potentially unsafe – water play without adult supervision while exhibiting proper behavior when credited. They also know to wait and adhere to etiquette and adult guidance. She credited this to the Hubbard Family Swim School.

She also appreciates that Hubbard doesn't advocate for "floaties," inflatable bands that can be placed on children's arms while they learn to swim. This, she said, enforces the importance of swim knowledge and safety.

"Floaties don't teach you that the water doesn't save you. It gives kids respect for the water," said Nowak, who lives in Glendale.

She also likes the family atmosphere. Awarding kids with ribbons for jobs well done is another special touch that underscores the positive environment.

"Bob and Kathy and everyone there are great to deal with. You really feel like you're family. They make you feel at home and welcome there," she said.

Children who are deaf, blind, have cerebral palsy or Down syndrome or are missing limbs are also among Hubbard's past and present students. There's the option of one-on-one classes or group lessons. They also offer scholarships to families who need them.

He talked about a 3-year-old boy who hated being around water so much that he didn't even want his hair washed and cried during the first two weeks of lessons. Now, his attitude has changed and he's confident in and around water. His mother wrote Hubbard a letter, stating that he was so proud to receive a ribbon that he slept with it under his pillow.

"Just watching the kids blossom ... we see the kid that's nervous coming in and two weeks later, they stride in and feel comfortable," Hubbard said. "We believe kids love the water and it gives them self-confidence."

Hubbard Family Swim School

WHERE: Phoenix, Peoria and Mesa

EMPLOYEES: 145

INTERESTING STAT: More than one in five fatal drowning victims are children younger than 14, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

DETAILS: 602-971-4044, hubbardswim.com

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