It's splash call

Long dormant South Bronx pool revived; neighborhood dives in

BY DANIEL BEEKMAN
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YOU CAN'T hear the splashes and laughter from the Grand Concourse, with the subway, buses and livery cabs roaring by.

You can't see the children swimming inside the stately brick building, diving and racing through the frothy water.

Tucked out of sight and earshot, the pool at 1130 Grand Concourse was the watery dungeon that the Bronx forgot. Until now.

Thanks to a new aquatics program, hundreds of borough residents are learning how to swim and using the decades-old swimming pool for the first time.

"I didn't like it at first because I was scared of the deep end," Joel Chavez, 9, said last Friday, standing poolside in dripping wet Mario Bros. swim shorts. "But then Ms. Eileen taught me how to swim. Now I really like it."

Ms. Eileen is Eileen Towey, 22, aquatics director for BronxWorks, the social services nonprofit that operates a community center at 1130 Grand Concourse.

The bustling neighborhood hub is located north of the Bronx Museum of the Arts between E. 166th St. and McClean St.

When Towey took charge of the pool last year, it was open just eight hours a week and averaged fewer than 60 swimmers a week.

"People didn't know the pool," she said, pausing to reprimand a mischievous pool basketball player. "But I saw the potential. I took it under my wing."

Towey secured funding and additional pool time and painted a banner to spread the word. She hung it outside the center, a Classical Revival structure built in 1926 by the Bronx Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and used for more than 20 years by Jewish youth organizations.

Now the 60-by-20-foot tile pool averages nearly 400 swimmers a week and Towey teaches multiple swim lessons weekday afternoons and evenings.

Launched last month, the new aquatics calendar includes free lessons for BronxWorks afterschool program participants, affordable lessons for neighborhood residents and a junior swim team. The paid lessons cost $100 for nine sessions.

"I came here before on Mondays and Wednesdays," said Nicole Gomez, 10, smiling under her blue swimming cap. "Now I come every day. We race a lot and I usually win. I beat the boys."

Many local children don't know how to swim, partly because there are few indoor pools in the neighborhood, Towey said.

That puts them in danger when they spend time at Orchard Beach and outdoor pools during the summer, she said.

Drowning is the second-leading cause of unintentional death for children, according to national statistics.

Towey said the BronxWorks program blends safety instruction with unadulterated fun.

"The kids just love to swim," she said. "It makes them so happy. I love seeing their smiles when they come down to the pool."

For aquatics program information, call (718) 508-3071.

abbeekman@nysdailynews.com

Joel Chavez, 9, is ready to start class.