Against the Odds, a South Bronx Swim Team Finds Success

By WINNIE HU    MAY 5, 2014

The pool is old and small, and scarred by chipped stone and peeling paint. But all that matters to the Blue Waves, the team that calls it home, is that it is a place to swim — one of the few indoor pools in the South Bronx.

Four evenings a week, the team's 32 members, ranging in age from 7 to 14, strap on goggles and fly across the pool at BronxWorks' Carolyn McLaughlin Community Center on the Grand Concourse. Many of them could barely swim when the team was formed 18 months ago. Now they are winning races around the New York region and recently competed in their first international meet in Puerto Rico.

"It's a lot of work," said Sean Dilchand, 13, who was nervous about competing against more experienced teams. "But we know even though we are at a disadvantage, we have each other for inspiration and support. That is the real spirit of this team."

The swim team was the idea of Eileen Towey, the aquatics director for BronxWorks, who came to the community center in 2008 as a part-time lifeguard. Ms. Towey, 24, started swimming competitively at age 5 in Buffalo, picking up friendships and life lessons in between medals. She said she wanted to offer children in the South Bronx the experience she had, of being part of a team.

First, though, she had to start with the basics. In 2011, she painted a banner advertising swim lessons — nine classes for $100 — and draped it across the front of the center. She enlisted interns to hand out fliers at delis and subway stations. Dozens of people signed up, many of whom said they never knew there was a pool so close by.

The pool, 60 feet long by 20 feet wide, was built in 1961 on the ground floor of the community center and later fell into disrepair. It was not fixed up until the 1990s after the building was acquired by BronxWorks, a nonprofit group then known as the Citizens Advice Bureau. BronxWorks is raising $635,000 for the first major renovation of the pool, lockers and shower rooms since then.

Ms. Towey soon had the makings of a team. She tapped 15 children who could make it through a lap or two in the pool and began holding practices with
them. Five dropped out, but others took their place after hearing about the team through word of mouth.

“I say ‘practice,’ but it was a lot of swimming lessons, too,” said Ms. Towey, who drilled the children on the breast stroke, the butterfly, flip turns and dives off the side of the pool. “I was determined to make my kids the best. I was willing to work with what I had.”

Amanda Crespo, 8, said she was so afraid of drowning in the deep end that she used to sit on the side of the pool and cry. “When I started practicing, that helped me learn to face my fear,” she said. “It felt better and I had more confidence.”

The name Blue Waves refers to the blue swim caps that the children earn after they show they can swim in the deep end; they wear red caps until then. The team competes in the Metro Swim League, a community league for children from low-income neighborhoods in New York and New Jersey.

The Blue Waves have an annual budget of $105,000, which is supported in part by private donations and an annual membership fee of $150 per child. The fee is subsidized for families who cannot afford it. The children and their parents have also raised more than $13,000 since October to cover their travel to Puerto Rico and another meet in North Carolina this month. They sold chocolate bars and made flan for bake sales. In December, they held a 75-minute swim-a-thon in the pool; a 7-year-old girl swam 118 laps straight, earning $1 a lap from her relatives.

Gowkarran Dilchand, a real estate agent and Sean’s father, said he drives his two sons to the BronxWorks pool — a 25-minute trip each way — even though there are pools closer to their home because the team is like a second family. “I feel like all the kids are my kids,” said Mr. Dilchand, who sits through every practice and meet. “I mentally keep track of all their times.”

Mr. Dilchand added that his sons had become more focused and confident, traits that have benefited them at school as well. His younger son, who likes to eat, has also lost 12 pounds since he started swimming.

At practice on a recent Wednesday night, Ms. Towey paced back and forth as her swimmers plowed through the water, three or four of them at a time in a single lane. “You have one minute’s rest,” she called out. “Save some energy so you’re not dead on the last lap.”

Afterward, Nicole Gomez, 11, bounded out of the pool. In the past year, she has brought her time in the 100-yard freestyle down to 1 minute 5 seconds. “I love competition,” she said. “It pushes me to get faster and do what I have to do.”

She won two races at the Puerto Rico meet, cheered on by her mother and relatives who flew over from the Dominican Republic. Ms. Towey, of course, was poolside, too.

“I want to go to the Olympics in 2020,” Nicole said. “And I’m going to take Ms. Eileen with me.”

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