

Black children are three times more likely to drown than white ones. Olympic champ **Cullen Jones** is out to remedy that **BY ANDREW LAWRENCE**

Photograph by **MICHAEL J. LEBRECHT II**/IDEUCE3 PHOTOGRAPHY

# Giving Kids a Lifeline

**H**e was only five years old when he found himself staring up at death, another black child on his way to becoming a statistic. Cullen Jones had not foreseen the danger ahead of him at the waterpark in Allentown, Pa., that summer afternoon in 1989. Not when he stood atop a waterslide with his mother, Debra, and father, Ronald. Not when Ronald, ahead of him in line, told him to hold fast to his inner tube. Not when he shot out of the slide like a torpedo, flipped forward from the inner tube and sank to the bottom of the pool.

Ronald was returning his inner tube and didn't notice what had happened; when he saw Cullen in trouble, he hollered for a lifeguard. As Debra—a poor swimmer herself—came down the slide last, she heard her son's shouts of joy suddenly cut off. At the bottom of the ride, she could just keep her head above water by standing on her tiptoes and was unable to join the rescue effort, by then already under way. Though it all happened in a flash, the time could not have passed more slowly for Cullen. No matter how hard he kicked, he couldn't get to air. No matter how much he thrashed, he couldn't shake the feeling that "someone was choking me, literally taking my breath away." Then everything went dark.



**F**or parents, there is no worse nightmare than to see their child dying and not be able to save him. For black parents, who are far less likely than their white counterparts to know how to swim, the fear of a child drowning can be especially strong. That fear can cause them to try to keep their children as far away from pools as possible; it is just one of several reasons why, generation after generation, many African-Americans never learn to swim.

But for Debra and Ronald Jones—whose son was saved by a lifeguard who performed mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on him—the near tragedy led them to enroll Cullen in swimming lessons. Within three days he was in a beginners' group at their YMCA in East Orange, N.J.

The opportunity to learn was all he needed. Now 26, the 6' 5", 210-pound Jones has become one of the world's best sprint swimmers. He holds one world and one U.S. record, and he won a gold medal on the U.S. 4 × 100-meter freestyle relay team at the 2008

"Kids definitely want to be in the water," Jones says. "You teach them how to be water-safe, and the drowning numbers drop."

Nearly 4,000 Americans drown every year. Drowning is the second leading cause of unintentional death in children from ages one to 19, killing almost three kids a day in the U.S. About half of the victims are older than four, the age at which the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children start swimming lessons.

Even the most basic survival skills could help prevent tragedies such as the one that occurred earlier this month, when six Louisiana teens drowned while playing in the Red River. The victims, five boys and a girl who ranged in age from 13 to 18 years old, had gathered near the river with their families for an afternoon barbecue and broke from the group to cool off in the water on a 100° day. When one child waded in too deep and was pulled under as the river floor dropped some 25 feet, another tried to save him—setting off a calamitous chain of events.



#### MAKING WAVES

Muhammad won 10 NCAA titles and set three U.S. records at Stanford, then went on to co-captain the U.S. Pan Am team.

one step closer to his quest to qualify for the 2012 London Games.

That's not the biggest challenge Jones has set for himself, however. He is trying to reshape his sport—to remove the whites-only reputation that swimming has in many black communities, to inspire young blacks to become elite swimmers and, most important, to prevent thousands of Americans, especially African-Americans, from drowning.

With his Olympic medal as a prop, Jones barnstorms the country as the face of USA Swimming's Make a Splash campaign, selling black parents in particular on the life-saving value of swimming lessons. He jumps into city pools to teach kids how to swim and travels from his training base in Charlotte to Washington, D.C., to try to convince lawmakers that lives and billions of dollars could be saved with a nationwide investment in children's "waterproofing" programs (in which kids are taught to swim in order to minimize their chances of drowning).

Olympics in Beijing. Two weeks ago at nationals in Irvine, Calif., his second-place finish in the 50-meter freestyle was good enough to qualify him for a place on the American squad for this week's Pan Pacific championship, bringing him

One by one each child went after the other until seven children altogether were thrashing for their lives in the water, which is near a public park but is not a designated swimming area. (There was no lifeguard, and trenches had been dug along the shore to discourage swimming.) A bystander jumped in and rescued 15-year-old DeKendrix Warner, but the other six wouldn't emerge from the muddy waters until nightfall, after rescue workers spent three hours searching for and finally recovering their bodies from a 30-foot-deep section of the river about 20 feet from where they disappeared. Marilyn Robinson, a family friend who was there that afternoon, could only watch helplessly with the other adults. "None of us could swim," the 38-year-old told *The Times of Shreveport*. "They were yelling, 'Help me, help me! Somebody please help me!' It was nothing I could do but watch them drown one by one."

Though the drowning rate for whites declines sharply after age 15, large numbers of blacks drown well into adulthood. That, not surprisingly, is almost entirely the result of their never having learned to swim. According to a 2010 USA Swimming survey of more than 2,000 children across the country, nearly 70% of black youngsters between the ages of six and 16 have "low or no" swimming skills—almost twice the figure for whites. (The nonswimming rate for Hispanic children is also alarming: 58%.) As a result, black children (age range: five to 14) are almost three

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times as likely to die from drowning as white kids. Black boys—who drown at twice the rate of African-American girls—are most at risk.

The obvious way to reverse this trend is to teach kids how to swim. USA Swimming estimates that the average beginners program costs about \$100 for 16 lessons, the minimum number necessary to ensure measurable progress. Though even that cost can be prohibitive for low-income families, the return on investment is huge. At worst, kids learn how to save their own lives. At best, they get hooked on a sport they can enjoy for years.

"Anybody who's involved in inner cities has a pretty good idea what happens when kids don't have activities," says USA Swimming president Jim Wood, who has coached in northern New Jersey for the past 33 years. "If they get involved in swimming and enjoy it, they get involved beyond that. They take advanced swimming. They take lifeguarding classes. And then all sorts of lights go on as to [other ways] they can succeed."

Since taking the helm at USA Swimming in 2006, Wood has made minorities' water safety a priority. In 2007 he began Make a Splash, a nonprofit program that helps underwrite free or low-cost swim programs in inner cities through partnerships with groups such as the YMCA and the Red Cross. Corporate sponsorships have largely funded the \$100,000 in grants that Make a Splash is distributing nationally this year, but USA Swimming hopes that Uncle Sam will eventually become the initiative's biggest benefactor.

In May the government allotted \$400,000 for a federal pilot program this fall in northern New Jersey, thanks to the success of earlier initiatives in Atlanta and Houston—where USA Swimming has provided lessons to a combined total of more than 12,800 kids—and the lobbying efforts of Wood and Jones. They went to Congress again in March to ask for \$450,000 to start a program in Chicago (which is still in the developmental stages) and coaxed lawmakers into submitting a line-item request for a \$5 million increase in the CDC's budget for drowning prevention (which awaits congressional approval). If President Obama signs off on the latter, Make a Splash will team with the CDC to push for more programs nationwide.

That would help fulfill a dream of Rep. Albio Sires (D., N.J.), who has led the Make a Splash effort in Congress. Sires worked as a recreation counselor in West New York, N.J., in the late 1960s, and one of his former campers—who had never learned to swim—drowned at the age of 17 on an outing to nearby Harriman State Park in May 1975. "If there had been [swimming] lessons, maybe he would not have drowned," says Sires.

In his March visit to Capitol Hill, Jones, wearing a dark-blue suit, rimless glasses and a pair of diamond earrings, joined 11 USA Swimming officials and associates for a 10-hour lobbying tour that included scheduled visits with six lawmakers. Without fail, every representative or staffer with whom he met asked to see Jones's gold medal.

The ribbon holding the medal is frayed to the brink of disintegration from two years of show-and-tell, but Jones knows his work is

## Jim Crow kept blacks out of almost every public beach and pool in the U.S. for much of the 20th century.



**A LASTING STAIN**  
Protestors at a motel pool in St. Augustine, Fla., were doused with acid by the motel's manager in 1964.

only beginning. He knows that even if swimming lessons are made accessible and affordable, many black parents will be afraid to lead their kids to the water. The fear was palpable during a USA Swimming focus group last winter at a Denver Y. "You're already uncomfortable and scared," said one African-American mother. "You're like, 'I'm paying them money so I can have heart palpitations on the sidelines.' It's not worth it. It really isn't."

**T**he seeds of that fear were sown in segregation. According to the book *Contested Waters*, a social history of swimming pools in the U.S., African-Americans were barred from even Northern urban pools after working-class public baths (where they had once been allowed) evolved into coed recreational swimming pools in the early years of the 20th century.

Jim Crow kept blacks out of almost every public beach and pool in the U.S. in the decades that followed. As Congress was debating the Civil Rights Act in June 1964, a racially mixed group of seven demonstrators staged a "wade-in" at a motel in St. Augustine, Fla.—formerly a slave-trading port—to protest their lack of access to pools and other public facilities. The motel manager showered the group with muriatic acid, a pool-cleaning chemical. (Police officers later jumped into the water and forced out the demonstrators.) A photograph of the incident made front pages nationally and is credited for facilitating the bill's passage days later.

As whites retreated to the suburbs and built pools in backyards and private clubs, blacks still had little access to public pools. Save for a municipal pool-building boomlet in the late 1960s that was designed to help prevent urban race riots—"State and local governments funded hundreds of local pools in urban areas to quite literally cool down angry black Americans," says *Contested Waters* author Jeff Wiltse, an associate professor of history at the University of Montana—cities stopped building pools and let existing ones deteriorate until they had to be closed.

As African-American participation in swimming continued to lag, some came up with explanations for the inability of most blacks to swim. One popular hypothesis—which has since been discredited—proffered by Ohio University's zoology department in a 1969 study titled "The Negro and Learning to Swim," was that blacks weren't as buoyant as whites. Among the reasons cited for this were blacks' purportedly lower lung capacity, heavier bones and poor physiological response to cold. (Dodgers vice president Al Campanis repeated the buoyancy theory in his notorious *Nightline* appearance in 1987.)



This blacks-can't-swim message, along with shabby or nonexistent pools and a lack of black swimming coaches, discouraged many African-Americans from even trying. But a few blacks swam against the current of stereotyping and achieved elite-level success. In 1984 Chris Silva, a UCLA senior from Menlo Park, Calif., was nationally ranked in the 4 × 100-meter freestyle relay and became the first black to swim in the U.S. Olympic Trials. In 1999 Sabir Muhammad, an Atlantan who won 10 NCAA titles and had set three U.S. records while at Stanford, became the first African-American to co-captain a U.S. international swim team, at the Pan Am Games in Winnipeg.

Both men later became leaders in the effort to attract blacks to competitive swimming. Silva was the director of minority programs at the International Swimming Hall of Fame until his death in a car accident in 1990. Muhammad merged a minority-focused swim program he helped start at the Boys & Girls Clubs of Atlanta with Make a Splash in 2007.

**J**ones cannot overstate the impact swim lessons have had on his life. While growing up in inner-city Irvington, he kept his swimming a secret from friends and many relatives, fearing he'd be teased if they found out. At the Y he discovered an affinity for racing. By age eight he was on a club team in Newark, competing against other black swimmers. By 15 he had moved on to an otherwise all-white team in West Orange that trained at a Jewish community center, where he was often the only black person in the building. His senior year of high school he landed a scholarship to North Carolina State. "Now, this is the same kid who about 10 years ago almost drowned at an amusement park," says Jones. "I was amazed."

Along the way he faced adversity that would steel his resolve. He lost his father, Ronald, a nonsmoker, to lung cancer during his junior year of high school. He worked as a lifeguard, among many other jobs, so he wouldn't be a burden to his mother, a health and safety policy manager for the utility company PSE&G.

In college, he won five ACC titles and, in 2006, an NCAA championship in the 50-meter freestyle—N.C. State's first national swimming crown in 13 years. Jones turned pro shortly thereafter. He signed a seven-year, \$2 million endorsement deal with Nike (at the time, the richest endorsement deal ever for a short-distance swimmer) and proved his worth at the '06 Pan Pacific games, during which he became the first African-American to break a world record (in the 4 × 100-freestyle relay) and the first to set an individual-event world record (in the 50 freestyle).

Still, even after his Beijing relay gold, he refuses to rest on his laurels. That's why he labors at the pool in Charlotte, trying to perfect his breathing, fine-tune his kick and improve his turns. An individual Olympic gold would give him even more sway with lawmakers, who keep insisting on closing city pools to help close budget gaps. Last summer Philadelphia shut down 27 of its 70 pools to cover a \$600,000 shortfall.

An individual gold might also give Jones the kind of mainstream fame that could help bring an end to shameful incidents such as the banning of 65 Philadelphia minority summer-camp kids from a private club in Huntingdon Valley, Pa., last summer. Though they had been invited by the club, opposition from its members (some of

whom used racial epithets) led to the kids' ouster. The Department of Justice sued the club in January but effectively halted action in May after the club was bought in bankruptcy by a local synagogue.

"What do you expect kids to do when you're shutting down pools?" Jones asks. "The only places they can go are the private places. Unfortunately, they're gonna turn the kids away."

**I**n a perfect world, every swimming club would be like Asphalt Green: accessible, inviting and safe. A recreational Shangri-la on 5½ acres of riverfront parkland on Manhattan's Upper East Side, Asphalt Green takes its name from the parabola-shaped asphalt plant that was converted into a community sports and arts center in 1984. Asphalt Green's AquaCenter houses Manhattan's only publicly accessible Olympic-sized pool—a 50-meter marvel whose shape-shifting properties (the bottom can be raised and lowered in sections, among other tricks) keep it in near constant use.

Asphalt Green's public-school waterproofing program is now 16 years old. Thanks in part to the facility's 3,000 dues-paying members, more than 30,000 local kids have learned how to swim either at the AquaCenter or at their own schools. Once counselors

## Growing up in the inner city, Jones kept his swimming a secret from his friends.



### BIG DIPPER

Jones led kids through a Make a Splash event last month at a recreation center in Washington, D.C.

persuade kids to get over the skimpy suits (which Asphalt Green provides gratis thanks to a donation from Speedo) and allay black swimmers' singular anxieties about chlorine—which renders their skin dry and ashy in appearance and causes processed hair to discolor or break off—the only remaining concern is whether the kids will ever get out of the water.

For Asphalt Green executive director Carol Tweedy, one of whose goals is to find and develop elite swimmers, this is a good problem to have. "We are really looking for talent in the communities of color,"

she says. "We look at kids in waterproofing to see who has a real feel for the water. We scholarship them into our swim school, then move them onto the swim team." Among the 200 kids on the squad is Lia Neal, a 15-year-old Brooklynite of Chinese and African-American descent who holds four national records. Like Jones, who is one of her idols, she raced at nationals, but was beaten out of a spot on the Pan Pacific squad. She could well wind up at the London Olympics if she continues progressing at her current pace.

Asphalt Green is the model to which Make a Splash aspires, and its success is one reason Jones jumps in the water with kids across the country and teaches them how to float and tread water—so that they can see him, touch him and, eventually, swim on their own. "If you introduce swimming as a fun thing, then kids pick up on it," Jones says. "Once they learn it, they've got it." For life. □