

LONG ISLAND**Long Island business owner hopes to save Black lives via swimming lessons**

Paulana Lamonier, a Haitian American entrepreneur and longtime swim coach, started a business, Black People Will Swim, with aspirations far beyond just turning a profit. She spent August helping young black adults and children learn how to swim. Credit: Johnny Milano; Debbie Egan-Chin

By Keldy Ortiz

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Young Black adults and children are on average nearly three times more likely than whites to drown, but a Uniondale swim instructor has spent August helping change that statistic.

Borrowing the in-ground backyard pool of a family friend in Hempstead, Paulana Lamonier, a Haitian American entrepreneur and longtime swim coach, started a business with aspirations far beyond just turning a profit.

Key among Lamonier's other aims is in the title of her pilot program launched in late July: Black People Will Swim.

Since then, about 50 students from Long Island, New York City and even New Jersey — some children, but mostly adults — have taken swimming lessons taught by Lamonier and three other certified instructors, she said.

For Lamonier, 30, the classes are a way to provide her clients access to a childhood rite of passage for many, but a lifelong hurdle for others.

"I'm equipping our community with the necessary tools to save their lives," said Lamonier. "It's a mission-based initiative, where we are empowering our community."

Black people in the United States between 25 and 29 are nearly twice as likely to drown than whites in the same age group, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Drowning deaths for Black children ages 5 to 9 are nearly three times higher, and for those between 10 to 14, nearly four times higher than whites of the same age, according to the CDC statistics, from 2019, the latest data available.

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"Drowning death rates are associated with persistent and concerning racial/ethnic disparities," said a June CDC report on the issue using data collected from 2005 to 2019.

"A better understanding of the factors that contribute to drowning disparities is needed," said the report.

"Implementing and evaluating community-based interventions, including those promoting basic swimming and water safety skills, among disproportionately affected racial/ethnic groups could help reduce drowning disparities."

The report does not list drowning statistics for people ages 30 and older.

Consistent over time, said Martine Hackett, an associate professor of public health at Hofstra University, has been the limited number of places where Blacks could swim.

"History absolutely plays a role in access and availability that Black people have had to swimming pools and areas where they can swim," Hackett said. "We know certainly that there's a history of segregated public pools across the United States and even right here in the Northeast."

That lack of access underscores what's at stake, she said.

"It's important for people to know how to swim," Hackett said, "in order to survive if they are close to water."

Tearanny Street said growing up near the Mississippi Delta region, she was drawn to water but didn't know how to swim. Black People Will Swim has moved her closer to changing that.

"I'm getting a lot of one-on-one training that makes me feel more confident," said Street, 35, of Brooklyn. "I want to be able to go the beach on my own without making a fool of myself. I want to save myself and others."

Paulana Lamonier offers encouragement to Tearanny Street, of Brooklyn, during a recent swimming lesson. Credit: Johnny Milano/JOHNNY MILANO

For Lisa Poindexter, also of Brooklyn, desire finally overcame safety concerns and led her to Lamonier on a recent humid August evening.

Because she couldn't swim, "fear of possibly drowning" kept her on the sand, clear of the ocean. But no longer, said Poindexter, 67.

"I wanted to make the attempt and try to learn," said Poindexter. "I go to the beach, but I'm mostly a spectator. It's helping me overcome the fear of being in the water."

The inaugural summer classes — five per student at an average of \$39 each — end Sept. 1, but Lamonier hopes to start another round at a still-to-be-determined indoor facility in 2022.

Douglas McMillon opened up his backyard pool for Lamonier's lessons, at no charge, and "took a lot of weight off her to find a pool."

"This is family," said McMillon, 70, who watched Lamonier grow up. "She really enforces the need for people to swim."

The oldest of three siblings, Lamonier learned to swim in high school. She then joined the swim team at York College before graduating with a degree in journalism.

While working as a freelance journalist, Lamonier said, her main source of income was as a swim instructor at a YMCA in Queens.

As she taught Black people to swim along with navigating swim caps for different types of hair, she also honed her teaching technique.

Lamonier said her approach has an acronym – F.A.C.E., which stands for fun, awareness, community and education. Along with booking lessons and learning more about what is offered, visitors to the Black People Will Swim website get a reminder of something else with historic disparities.

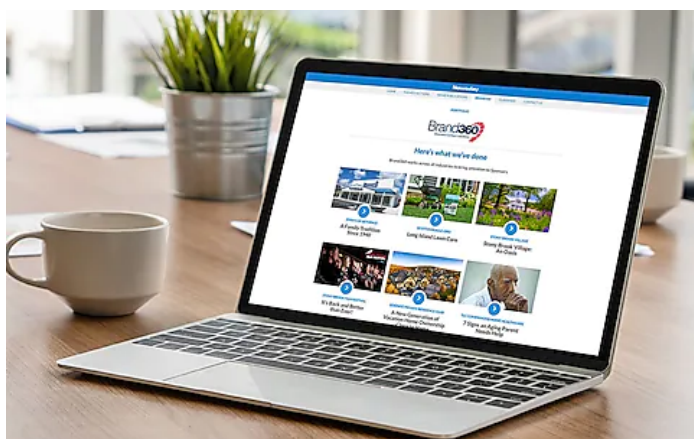
"As a Black woman-owned and operated business, the BPWS team is like the Black Avengers," says a message about the organization on the website, "determined to help beginner swimmers go from fearful to fearless."

With the summer heading toward an end, Lamonier said she is just beginning.

"My dream is to have a Black-owned swimming facility, where Black people, people of color can go in and see people who look like them," she said, "and know what it's like to have braids and put a swim cap on, to be voluptuous and curvy and know that you're not the only one."

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