

Transforming Thoughts into Action: How Diversity on Deck Began

By Kendall Carpenter

In 2016, Simone Manuel won the 100-meter freestyle, becoming the first Black woman to win an individual Olympic gold medal in swimming. I was 9 years old when that happened, but it wasn't until I joined a USA Swimming team shortly after that I truly understood why Manuel's win was so impactful: the sport of swimming, like many other aquatic sports and activities in the U.S., is not racially diverse—something I have felt and continue to experience first-hand.

I thought about my experiences as a swimmer when, in the fall of 2022, I was given the opportunity to do a project for my 10th grade Independent Research class. My teacher, Mrs. Lerner, recommended that I choose a topic I was passionate about, and so I did just that: I spent the year researching and conducting interviews for my project, *Diversity on Deck: An Examination of Black Participation in Aquatics*. This topic was dear to my heart because it affects me personally. As an African American competitive swimmer, I know how isolating it can feel to be the only Black person on deck. I also know how affirming it can be when you “see yourself” in a group of people; you feel included, you feel like you belong.

When I started my school project, I had one major research question: “Why isn't there more racial diversity in the sport of swimming, and how can we, as a society and within our local communities, encourage Black children to have greater participation in aquatics?” I quickly learned that the inequality gap in aquatic sports and activities is rooted in the fact that there is a disproportionate number of Black children who do not know how to swim and this is a consequence of much bigger issues. Systematic racism, generational trauma, obstacles to pool access, the expense of instruction, the lack of representation, and the internalization of racial stereotypes are some of the historic and social factors that have contributed to drowning rates and impede the diversification of aquatic activities.

After presenting my research at Howard County's annual Student Leadership Conference, it became clear to me that advocating for swimming skills and water competency was a passion of mine. Furthermore, I was able to see that other people cared about this issue as well. It felt wrong to just let information about the disparities sit in my head without doing anything about it. Simply acknowledging a problem is pointless if there are no actions taken to improve the situation.

So, with the encouragement of my teacher, family, and friends, I was able to act on my vision. I realized that I could address the issue of water safety and swimming ability by offering free lessons so more people can easily access them. In addition to that, I knew I could bring other volunteers together and we could mentor those we work with, helping them feel more included and modeling how they could be successful in aquatics, too.

I believe all of us must take action, as communities and as individuals, to help preserve lives and create opportunities. Swim lessons need to be accessible and affordable, and we should all do our part to help youth navigate aquatic spaces comfortably and safely. Furthermore, young people from underrepresented communities need to be exposed to and welcomed into water sports, activities, and careers. They must feel like they belong, and we must deworm ourselves from parasitic stereotypes and ideologies that have hindered our greater presence in aquatics. If we—as individuals and partnering organizations—come together, we can create diversity on deck!

