

A Pool of Friends



Bob Hubbard talks with two of his certified swim instructors as they take a breather between students. Hubbard's first four child swimmers were his own children. Now his swim school has become a first choice for area parents seeking professional swim instruction for their children.

Ben Norris

The sounds of bare feet slapping against the wet tile of the floor are followed by a loud splash. Children kick through the water in purple flippers and blue goggles. School is in session.

Since its opening in 1998, the Hubbard Swim School has been introducing children to the water before they even celebrate their first birthday, with some of them floating before they are six months old.

"Philosophically, parents who put their kids in the water at an early age receive great rewards," says Bob Hubbard, owner of the award-winning school. "At only two or three years old, they seem confident and aware."

Hubbard Swim School is nationally recognized as part of the Aquatic Baby Congress, a global network focusing on aquatic programs for babies, toddlers and children.

Hubbard is also a member of the U.S. Swim School Association, which he describes as a trade association of swim schools fostering aquatic education across the country.

According to Hubbard, the training starts with children as young as six months old. Under the supervision of swim instructors and parents, they learn the basic skills to become comfortable in the water.

In the pool, toddlers glide through the temperature-controlled water with swim coaches nearby.

"We've got a number of kids who are independent at 18 months," Hubbard says. "Some of our exception-

al students can jump in the water and swim 18 to 20 feet at that age."

Hubbard attributes this kind of progress to small group classes, progressive curriculum and carefully assessing every child's needs.

Alissa Johnson, a graduate student from ASU, has been working with a seven-year-old autistic student Danielle for a year. Danielle comes once a week, as part of the special needs day where she develops bonding and communication skills normally rare in autistic children.

"Danielle is great," Johnson boasts while Danielle tightens the strap on her flippers. "She's what helps keep me in the water every day."

It's this kind of close bond that seems to weave instructors, students and parents together like a family. Bob talks about his students so proudly one would think he was talking about his own kids, and his workers look up to him like a father.

"I've been working here for five years," says Ed McHale, a coach at the Hubbard School, standing proudly next to a small pool where babies who can't yet talk move gracefully through the water, guided by the hands of their parents or instructors. "Bob and Kathy are like surrogate parents."

Operations director Deb Paparelli says she has enjoyed every minute of her four-and-a-half year employment at the school.

"No matter what the weather is like outside," she says, pointing to the rain streaming down the front windows, "it's always happy inside these doors."

Swim School Teaches Strokes to All Ages

Just inside the front doors, a few parents and employees stand around the snack bar, keeping an eye on kids in the play area. Other parents and grandparents watch from plastic chairs, looking through the large windows into the pool.

Inside the swim area, children slide down the tongue of a giant frog into the pool. The water reflects on the colorful tile walls as some students swim within the confines of their fruit-loop-like lane separators. Floatation devices — yellow, pink, blue and red marine animals — lie scattered about the sides of the pools.

Despite the framed pictures of babies floating independently in the water and a Guiding Light award on the desk, Hubbard's office looks like the most boring place in the building,

would one day share his last name. Kathy Hubbard was a high-level swimmer who nearly climbed to the top during Olympic trials, narrowly missing a spot on the Olympic team but still placing in the NCAA competition two years in a row.

In the early 1990s the two ran a highly competitive, non-profit swim training center, the Phoenix Swim Club, where they were introduced to teaching. It didn't take much for the team to become addicted. Hubbard left a lucrative career in law and business management to open the swim school. The gamble paid off.

Having taught eight children of their own, instructing seemed to call to the Hubbards. They say they both find teaching more rewarding than competition.



A family affair — Hubbard's daughter and granddaughter are among the regulars at the popular swim school.

Right: Bob Hubbard, owner of the Hubbard Swim School on Thunderbird, says he has students as young as 18 months old who are already independent in the water.



most likely because the majority of his time is spent outside of it, with parents, employees and children. His whole life is a reflection of those three elements.

Hubbard adopted his aquatic talents as a young man working as a lifeguard in New York City, battling the frigid waters of the Atlantic Ocean to keep swimmers safe.

After high school, he enrolled in Xavier College in Cincinnati, Ohio. Once there, he met the woman who

Hubbard has since been awarded the Guiding Light award by the U.S. Swim School Association, an honor given for outstanding contributions to swim schools. But for Bob, the real reward comes with the sound of splashing, the laughter of friends and co-workers and the knowledge that the stroke of every child's arms through the water could be another life saved. ■

Hubbard swim school is located near the intersection of Thunderbird and 32nd Street. They can be reached at 602-971-4044.