



WENDY MCCALL

'A Place WHERE I Belong'

MAHOGANY MERMAIDS PROVIDE a Welcoming Space

THIS CHARLOTTE, NORTH CAROLINA, MASTERS CLUB GIVES WOMEN OF COLOR AN OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN TO SWIM AND COMPETE

By Elaine K. Howley

Nadine Ford learned to swim as a kid but didn't do much with that skill aside from the occasional summertime dip. When she decided several years ago to try a triathlon, she realized her swimming skills probably needed a refresher and signed up for lessons.

As with most things Ford undertakes, one thing led to a social other, and before she knew it, she was leading a small group swim. "I didn't want to practice on my own," she says. "I started reaching out to people who I knew swim, and we started growing organically."

The mix of friends who answered her call were mostly Black women. When Ford went to get her triathlon bag embroidered in advance of her race so that she'd be able to identify her gear in the transition zone, the embroiderer asked her what she wanted put on the bag. She had a flash of brilliance. "Put on there the 'Mahogany Mermaids,'" she replied, a nod to her expanding swimming pod.

The group became more formalized with Ford as the coach. Though she says she wasn't exactly an expert in the beginning—"I'm there with

YouTube in one hand and a book in the other saying, 'OK, let's look this up,'" she says, laughing—her willingness to work with others to help them get better helped solidify the group as more than just a social group. Before long, the Mahogany Mermaids became a U.S. Masters Swimming club.

SPREADING THE SWIM LOVE

Tara Johnson is one of Ford's disciplined disciples. Johnson grew up in Brooklyn and never had an opportunity to learn to swim or enjoy the water much as a kid. But as the now 49-year-old contemplated a while back reaching the half-century mark, she decided it was time to learn to swim. She'd wanted to do a triathlon, but her lack of swimming skills—and intense feelings of seasickness in the water—made that nearly impossible.

But a friend told her about the Mahogany Mermaids, which was just what Johnson needed to get swimming. "I was so intrigued," she says. "These are women my age and older, and African American. I was like, 'Oh, my gosh! I had to be



part of that! It wasn't easy, but sometimes you have to come out of your comfort zone. And I'm doing it."

The camaraderie of the group has been paramount to her finally being able to make it all the way across the pool for the first time. "I was so nervous, but I felt so accomplished," she says. "I finally got it." And perhaps next year, or whenever the pandemic makes it more likely, she might revive the idea of completing that triathlon.

The group's cohesiveness is a big part of what keeps her coming back to the group.

"I've been here in North Carolina for 10 years now, and I still find it very hard to connect with other women," Johnson says. "There aren't many African American women to connect with at my job [as a special education teacher]. But the Mermaids, we connect a lot, and we're like-minded. It's really been an honor to be part of that

and be able to talk with and socialize with other women. It's a place where I belong."

EXTENDING HER REACH

Ford became a USMS-certified Adult Learn-to-Swim instructor in 2017 and received her Level 2 coach certification two years later. She began offering lessons and coaching.

What started as her attempt to get better at swimming for a triathlon has now snowballed into a 40-person USMS club that's welcoming to a diverse group of women in Charlotte, with a second group in Albemarle, a small town about 40 miles away.

Avis Kinney, who coaches the Albemarle group, says she got involved when the director of the Y where the group now swims reached out. Kinney had long been involved with teaching kids' swimming lessons at the Y and had become a USMS-certified ALTS instructor, but hadn't had much opportunity to apply her new skills until the Mahogany Mermaids began offering a workout there in the spring of 2019.

Kinney has found that helping the predominantly older cohort of women who turned up to be a real source of joy. "It's been rewarding," she says. "Just getting them into the water and moving through the water" is special.

Similarly, many of the swimmers she's worked with didn't have any experience with swimming or water safety, but a couple have been more advanced. Trying to accommodate everyone has been a challenge, but one that Kinney says she's relished. "We just had to meet each swimmer where they were."

FUN AND HOMEWORK

One of Ford's secrets to success is that she requires attendance. Members are expected to attend one session per week, and "we have a requirement that you have to get in at least two swim practices on your own," Ford says. "Because when we get together, it's like 90 percent practice and 10 percent sitting around giggling and Googling. To make up for that 10 percent, you have to get out on your own. We have routines and homework that you have to have done before the next practice."

Those assignments are based entirely on the needs of the individual swimmer. For newer swimmers, practicing push-offs, breakouts, kicking, and getting comfortable floating on their back might be on the docket. For a college-level swimmer, it's a full-blown interval workout to train speed and efficiency. Ford also uses a lot of videos in her coaching to help her athletes visualize what good technique looks like and give them examples of what they should practice.

In addition to pool training, Ford also encourages her swimmers to get comfortable in open water, with organized training sessions in the summer months. The focus, Ford says, is on being safe and supporting swimmers in getting outside their comfort zone and away from the black line.

EMPOWERING OTHERS

The novel coronavirus pandemic derailed some plans Ford had for her young program, most notably the club's first swim meet, which was planned for right around the time the shutdowns occurred. The aim of that meet was to introduce new swimmers to

the joy of competition in a fun and low-key way, to let them see what a meet was like.

But the group is also open to experienced swimmers, of color or otherwise, provided they're women.

Nashira Waldron grew up swimming and competed at Howard University. A friend who knew Ford connected Waldron, and even though Waldron hadn't swum in a long time, "it just made sense for me to join in," she says.

Waldron believes that beyond the fun of swimming with the group, representation matters. Her being one of the more advanced members of the club meant that her participation might carry a bit more weight. For other women to see her climb the blocks and compete at her level might inspire them to work even harder.

Waldron's inspiration of others goes beyond the Mermaids to her own family. "My mom has actually started swimming with us," she says. And perhaps even more important, Waldron says, as a mom to a 9-month-old and a 2½-year-old, modeling fitness and swimming skills to her kids is key. Often when she's headed to the pool, her older child asks, "Mommy go swimming?" "That's important to me," Waldron says.

When she arrives at the pool, Waldron says, she experiences a feeling similar to what she felt swimming at a historically Black university. "With Nadine, it was like a restart of what I felt at Howard," she says. "I felt the same level of comfort around those women because we're all African American and we're swimming."

Waldron credits Ford for creating this environment of inclusion. Every morning, she sees Ford has posted messages to motivate and support her swimmers.

"She's all in," Waldron says. "If it weren't for her, I wouldn't be swimming laps right now."

Or competing. She was planning to compete in the meet, which Ford hopes to reschedule for later this year or sometime in 2021.

"I WAS SO INTRIGUED [WHEN I LEARNED OF THE MAHOGANY MERMAIDS]. THESE ARE WOMEN MY AGE AND OLDER, AND AFRICAN AMERICAN. I WAS LIKE, 'OH, MY GOSH! I HAD TO BE PART OF THAT!' IT WASN'T EASY, BUT SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO COME OUT OF YOUR COMFORT ZONE. AND I'M DOING IT."

**—TARA JOHNSON,
MEMBER OF THE MAHOGANY MERMAIDS**



The group also hopes to restart in-person training later in 2020, depending on how COVID-19 restrictions play out. Ford is planning to launch an adult beginner swimming program on or about Nov. 1. That eight-week program will help orient new swimmers to swimming for fitness and fun with a group.

For all of the hard work and intense inspiration that's being created, Ford is having a blast with her Mahogany Mermaids. But she also realizes the important impact her efforts and the welcoming atmosphere fostered by the group can have on drowning prevention and making a meaningful improvement in the racial disparities that still exist in swimming.

"Honestly, when I started, I just wanted to swim," Ford says. But over time, the mission has evolved to include the history of and education about Blacks and swimming, water-safety skills, fitness, enjoyment of the water, and a very empowering message to women of all colors that they can swim too, no matter obstacles that might've prevented them from participating in the past.

"Now I will challenge somebody when they say, 'Black people don't swim,'" Ford says. "I say, 'Oh yeah, we do. Yeah, we do. Easily.'" 🐬

New England Masters Swim Club member Elaine K. Howley is an award-winning freelance writer and editor specializing in sports, health, and history topics.