

Sensory Cove Swim Program Meets Needs of Autistic Children

Lessons offered free of charge through the For Scout Foundation

Providing free swim lessons for children with autism and extreme water sensory issues is a dream come true for Katie Cantrell, creator of the new Sensory Cove swim program offered at Otter Cove Aquatic Park by St. Charles Park District.

The idea for Sensory Cove began in 2018 after Cantrell, an Otter Cove swim team coach, lifeguard and instructor, worked with an autistic boy who had extreme water sensory issues. At first he wouldn't even dip his toes in the water but after much nurturing and care, Cantrell said by the end of the summer, the boy became more comfortable in the water.

"I got this little boy to dunk his head and blow bubbles in the pool with me," said Cantrell, a 2019 St. Charles North High School graduate. "His mom cried tears of joy, and I knew then that there was a greater need for this type of programming."

She worked with Park District staff to make this dream a reality and also secured funding to offer the lessons at no charge, because Sensory Cove is two-fold for Cantrell. Not only does it fulfill a need in the community, it also honors her sister, Scout Cantrell, who passed away in 2014 at the age of 9 from complications from an asthma attack.

The program provides one-on-one instruction with specially trained swim instructors, for children who would not otherwise benefit from a group swim class held during regular swim hours. Each lesson meets for four weeks on Sunday mornings for 30 minutes, before the park opens which has minimal water features turned on, less noise and fewer people in the area. Registrants must be in grades K-6.

It's important to create an environment free of sensory overload stimulators. During lessons, minimal water features are turned on and there's very few people in attendance making it a comfortable learning experience for participants.

Cantrell also conducted her own research when developing the program, including interviewing families with autistic children to learn what tools and methods worked well. Along the way she discovered the support kick boards Sensory Cove swimmers use during lessons. These key teaching elements were established: 1. Direct the child vs. asking. Now it's time to enter the water. You can jump off the side or you can use the ladder. 2. Use this-then-that statements. First we will close our eyes, then we dunk our heads. First we use the kickboard, then we get to jump off the side. 3. Use verbal and/or nonverbal ways the child can ask to enter the water. 4. Emphasize floating skills and water safety, such as getting to the side.

The primary goal was to offer the program to see if there was a need in the St. Charles community with little or no cost to the participant. Every lesson opportunity was full. In the 2019 season, staff accommodated more than 50 participants. Each lesson has resulted in a child getting wet and enjoying the experience.

"It's an awesome opportunity for families," said Alex Weidner, Otter Cove Supervisor. "It gives them hope that their children will have the opportunity to feel comfortable and safe in the water, and also grows their community of families in similar situations."

Cantrell said of the first Sensory Cove swim lesson: “To see every single child in the water and engaging with their instructors was just wonderful. Seeing it all come together made my heart full that these children were flourishing in Sensory Cove.”

Like her big sister Katie, Scout was a competitive swimmer and passionate about the sport. Through the For Scout Foundation, of which Katie is a director, swim lessons are already offered free to children in need of financial assistance. Since 2018, the Foundation has contributed \$26,000 in financial aid for swim lessons and the development of Sensory Cove.

Providing Sensory Cove lessons at no charge is an extension of this mission and carries on Scout’s motto, “to make the world a little bit better place,” Cantrell said. When Cantrell presented her idea of Sensory Cove to staff, 12 staff immediately signed up for the training, filling every spot. Thanks to Fox Valley Special Recreation and St. Charles Aquatics, lifeguards have been trained in technique and skills in working with children on the spectrum in the water.

The program’s overall impact is amazing. Cantrell said it’s been her journey in life to carry on Scout’s legacy. “Projects like Sensory Cove are most definitely making the world a little bit better place, and I hope she is smiling in Heaven. I think she is, especially on Sunday mornings at Sensory Cove.”