

Swim to Survive takes plunge to keep kids safe



By Brock Weir

Roll. Tread. Swim.

Just three little words can help give kids the basic skills they need to survive an unexpected fall into water, according to Sport Aurora and the Lifesaving Society, who launched a new season of the Swim to Survive program Thursday afternoon at the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex (SARC).

Among the first to get their feedback this year were the Grade 3 students of Vanessa Moore of St. Joseph Catholic Elementary School, who made the trip to the SARC to help fill in the blanks between those three words: Roll into deep water, Tread water for one minute, Swim 50 metres.

‘They have been so excited about this – beyond words excited,’ said Ms. Moore, watching the students as they were split into groups, each with an instructor, based on their respective skill levels in the water. ‘They have been very curious about it because they don’t really know what to expect.’

For Sport Aurora, Activate Aurora, and the Lifesaving Society, it is all about awareness.

Swim to Survive was first launched as a joint initiative last spring and made available to both local school boards. While the Lifesaving Society has previously operated this program both within and beyond York Region, a grant was pursued by Sport Aurora to help offset the cost of delivery while the Town donated the required pool time.

In Aurora, 10 elementary schools are involved, for a total of 420 Grade 3 students who will be learning these survival skills over the next four months.

‘There are three major components in this Swim to Survive, which is rolling into the water, treading and swimming,’ says Adrian Wong, Recreation Supervisor for Aquatics and Fitness, for the Town of Aurora. ‘For the most part, the Swim to Survive standard is Roll into the Water, which is an unexpected fall into the water and being able to fall into the water safely, similar to how in other sports you learn how to fall safely. Then you learn how to tread for one minute and that is to essentially figure out your orientation and where you’re at, so whether you fall off a boat, whether you fall into a backyard pool, figure out where there is a point of safety and then you would swim 50 metres.’

‘Most drowning cases happen fairly close to shore within 50 metres and I think that is based on statistics and they have created the Swim to Survive Standard. If you can do all of these skills, roll and then tread and then swim in the following sequence, you will be safer. You can pass the standard and if you were to fall into the water you will be able to self rescue.’

Mr. Wong comes by his passion for the program honestly. He describes his student self as ‘that awkward 10-year-old kid who really didn’t know how to swim and had to put a life jacket on for everything.’ As new Canadians, he says his parents weren’t aware that swimming lessons were an option and he credits a school swim program that redirected him and set him on a path to becoming a

lifeguard.

Building kids' awareness of these skills at a Grade 3 level is fundamental to the program, notes Sport Aurora's Ron Weese. Experts, he says, look at this as an "important time to get children involved and engaged in water activities" while teaching them how to be safe in and around the water.

"It is a time when children are most inquisitive about water," says Mr. Weese. "The reason why Sport Aurora and Activate Aurora is in here is to promote physical activity in all environments and water is a very important environment. We hope out of this they will be able to swim, they won't be afraid of the water, they can get in and out of the water safely, and then maybe they will start a learn to swim program, or participate with the ducks or another competitive swim program. At the end of the day, if that kid is invited to a pool party, you want them to participate fully and feel comfortable and confident."

Adds Mr. Wong: "In terms of drowning statistics, children ten and under are considered to be a high risk. Looking at Grade 3, it is an optimal time and opportunity where we would get them engaged so hopefully we will be able to make a difference that way."

While Swim to Survive's philosophy can be summed up in three words, Mr. Wong says the program's measure of success can be summed up in just one: "Awareness."

"The whole point of Swim to Survive is to build awareness. It is not realistic necessarily to expect that someone is going to come in and within three one-hour periods turn into a stellar swimmer who will be able to save lives, save themselves and whatnot, but this is an exposure program," he says. "We will be handing out certificates at the end of the three-day sessions that will essentially say whether or not they pass the standard. If not, it has a redirecting mechanism and we recommend you go to swim lessons to continue on your journey of learning how to swim."