

Christina gives her answers to the most Frequently Asked Questions about the Project as at the 1st May 2011

In an absolute nutshell, just what is the Project about?

Christina:

MICRO-ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF MOTHERS AND TEENAGE GIRLS AS COMMUNITY SWIMMING TEACHERS TO REDUCE GLOBAL CHILD DROWNING

What change do you want to bring to the world?

Christina:

The Sri Lanka Women's Swimming Project (WSP) is a unique community drowning reduction program to teach poor rural and coastal women and teenage girls to swim and empower them to teach their own children and make them safe near water.

The WHO reports a global drowning epidemic of a million deaths each year, mainly in tropical Asia. Generally, swimming is commercialised and run by men. The WSP specifically addresses those cultural barriers which prevent the majority of Asian women and girls from learning to swim.

Most charitable swim programs concentrate on children directly, so that a decade has to pass before these children are even old enough to pass on their skills.

The WSP directly trains and employs female non-swimmers to solve the drowning problem through economic empowerment.

What are the primary activities of your project

Christina:

The primary activity of the WSP is to reduce global death by drowning by teaching people to swim. What is critically lacking are teachers. To reach women and girls in rural and coastal communities, the teachers must be female, but the teachers first to be taught to swim themselves.

Teaching in the West is driven by competition and recreation in good quality water in a physically and socially safe environment. In a developing rural communities surrounded by challenging water, the Project's primary activities have to cater for the cultural, social, survival and safety characteristics of a totally different aquatic and economic environment.

Thus, finding water that is safe to teach in, ensuring privacy from prying predatory males, sourcing swimsuits to donate to people who are too poor to buy them and even persuading women to put on the swimsuits and enter the water to learn to swim at all are, in the first instance, concurrent primary Project activities.

Moreover, with no national water safety procedures and practices in place, the Project has to add wet and dry rescue, first aid, casualty-handling, cardiovascular resuscitation and community water safety education training as parallel primary activities to its program. For example, in an emergency, the Project even has to provide for a motorised rickshaw to bring a doctor to the scene or the casualty to the hospital.

Thus, unlike running swimming in a developed country, where teaching swimming is just that, the primary activities of this Project have to embrace the many other simultaneous activities just described.

What is innovative about your project?

Christina:

The WSP is the first rural project in the world to break the Asian cultural barrier to women and teenage girls swimming by training them as swimming teachers. Instead of breaking the drowning cycle by the easy option of only teaching children, the Project bridges the challenging switch from sari to swimsuit over several generations simultaneously and empowers parents in the community to transfer the knowledge to their own children. Since there are hardly any public pools in the rural communities, the Project solves the pool problem by renting run-down private residences with pools.

The Project has also pioneered the teaching of swimming to meet the causes of drowning. People do not drown because they cannot swim; they drown because they cannot breathe. Thus, the ability to float face-up-and-breathe, motionless, for long periods is a principal survival skill. From this back float, students progress directly into back and front crawl, maintaining complete mastery of breathing, to become swift, sound and safe swimmers.

By addressing adult non-swimmers first, the Project involves the community directly, rather than making teaching swimming an external commercial responsibility at greater cost. The innovation empowers women and teenage girls by creating a totally new career field largely independent of previous educational attainment.

Teaching swimming is a very flexible micro-economic activity, which can be fitted in hourly with domestic responsibilities. A further innovation is to find these women employment at other pools, extending the reach of the drowning reduction.

What can you tell us about the economic conditions, political structures, norms and values, demographic trends, history, and your experiences with the Sri Lankan community?

Christina:

Sri Lanka is a tropical paradise in which hardly any of the population outside the capital can swim. It is a well-nourished, well-educated country with First World academic institutions. However, swimming is largely the preserve of the

educated elite. In the Dec 2004 Tsunami, 36,000 people perished, 80% of them women and children.

Sri Lanka is a typical Asian culture in which girls at puberty are drawn apart from boys to develop modesty in demeanour and dress. Culture and couture thus conspire to become obstacles to women swimming. In the poorer rural, coastal and even city communities, females will be chaperoned, wash whilst clothed at the well or communal washing place and are indoctrinated to stay away from water. Tourism has a negative effect as swimwear is largely considered immodest.

The majority of Asian women have no experience of a large body of water beyond knee depth and will only enter fully clothed. Tight wrap-around dresses hinder agility and freedom of movement when wet. Almost without exception, when presented with a drowning crisis, women are unable either to rescue a child in difficulty or, save themselves from drowning.

In many cases, they have no idea what to do with a drowning victim and a drowning will often do not appear in national statistics. There is no universal water safety education, CPR training or ambulance service in place outside the cities. Fatalism, not self-preservation is the pervading philosophy.

The concept of simply floating and breathing is only just now surfacing in Western swim culture; it is totally absent in Sri Lanka.

What inspired you as the founder to start this project?

Christina:

As a wife and mother of four, I run a small swim school in England. I was so devastated by the impact of the loss of life on tsunami survivor families that I flew to Sri Lanka at once to assist in any way possible. In country, I learned that 80% of the tsunami's fatalities were women and children and it was evident that cultural barriers had prevented these women from learning to swim. I believe that knowing how to swim is a right, not a luxury and so, the Project was born at a tiny swimming pool on a near derelict property in a coconut plantation. Since teenage girls are tomorrow's mothers, I included them in the Project. Even whilst successfully undergoing treatment for cancer, with chemotherapy, surgery and radiation, I have fought tirelessly, with very little funding, to keep the project running for over five years. It is my personal, unpaid contribution to continue to empower women, reduce global drowning and make people safe near water.

SOCIAL IMPACT

How has your project has been successful and do you measure success?

Christina:

Success?

1,700 women who can now swim.

Women swimming teachers are now accepted.

The Project has run at five locations.

I have been invited to address the World Drowning Conference in Vietnam.

The Project is the first swim organisation to adopt the International standard of “Can Swim Safely” of a ten-minute float and 100m continuous swim for its swimmers.

Finally, the Project’s most outstanding female swimming teachers, none of whom could swim before, now have careers to support themselves through university, support their own families and win international travel scholarships. One is now Senior Coach at a swim school run by an Olympian.

The greatest measure of success are the words of the last-mentioned, who said: “Christina, you cannot stop now. There are so many, many more people like me who need this opportunity.”

How will your project evolve over the next three years?

Christina:

The critical path is a lack of female teachers, as each first has to be taught how to swim.

The solution is a full time residential women’s community swimming teacher training centre working to international standards, including first aid, water rescue and CPR. Based on a private property with a pool equipped with a swim current generator to simulate any continuous swim distance, the academy will equip each graduate with a business development pack to open up new swim schools of their own.

The Project will also make available a low cost, locally produced, community swimming teacher training handbook, backed up by mini video compact discs (VCDs) showing how lessons are to be conducted and the standards to be attained. All the material will be downloadable free from the Internet.

What barriers might hinder the success of your project and how do you plan to overcome them?

Christina:

Scaling up of the operation is a risk.

Suitable operational locations for the expanded output have been found and their cost identified, along with the staff to run them.

Training material for survival-based rather than competition-based swimming does not currently exist and this has to be authored, illustrated, printed, filmed

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and mounted on a website translated also into Sinhala. Most of the raw material has already been gathered, so the end product can be considered low risk.

The founding of an international drowning research centre in Bangladesh will speed up international validation of the material and may well provide synergy with the work already done.

An incidental local concern is that because the Project gives its training of both teachers and swimmers for free, it might be seen as unfair competition to lifesavers and others who earn a living by teaching swimming; the Project will continue maintain good relations and take care that its activities are not seen as poaching customers. The fact that the Project teaches adults rather than children and women and teenage girls rather than boys and men helps considerably.

The Project also focuses on the rural and coastal poor who, in any case, are not be able to pay for lessons or qualifications. Funding is the ultimate hindrance; considerable effort has been devoted to raising awareness of the Project in the international global drowning prevention arena which, hopefully, will yield dividends.

Beating cancer has energised me to ever greater levels of achievement and success breed more success.

Are you involved in any partnerships?

Christina:

The WSP is the International Federation of Swimming Teachers Associations' (IFSTA) only non-state affiliated member. Membership has exposed the WSP to the international swimming fraternity who have donated training material (not always applicable to survival-based swimming) and a network of helpful contacts.

The Project has, in the past, been supported by the John Lewis Partnership, various Rotary Clubs and the Aid Sri Lanka Foundation; its principal current funding and training material development supporter is the Lifesaving Foundation of Ireland.

Throughout the six years of operation, the proprietor and founder of Total Immersion Inc., Terry Laughlin, has been a supporter of the Project, supplying it at no cost with the proprietary training material that forms the core of our swimming training methods, the value and efficiency of which cannot be overstated.

In Sri Lanka, the Project operates under the supervision of the Sri Lanka Aquatic Sports Union (SLASU) on behalf of the Ministry of Sports. SLASU is the national governing body for all aquatic sports and competitions.

The Project has staffed and run a weekly Women's Swimming Day for the last three years at a post-tsunami community swimming pool built by a consortium of local and overseas charities.

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Numerous individuals complete the partnership with steady as well as intermittent but generous donations from as far away as New Zealand, the United States and the United Kingdom.

Finally, we will address the ultimate partnership: the World Conference on Drowning Prevention at Danang, in Vietnam in May 2011.

How do you get the women in to swim with the Project?

Christina:

Women are recruited into swimming in three ways: actively, on a recruiting campaign; passively, by word-of-mouth; and internally, by bring-a-friend.

The process begins with visits to the local schools to persuade the female teaching staff to learn to swim. As pillars of the community, they set the seal of approval on the transition from swimsuit to sari and reassure the local community that swimming takes place in a secure, male-free environment.

Teenage girls in the school are then invited to join in as a free after-school activity.

In addition, the Project makes recruiting house calls to all its immediate neighbours in an ever-increasing circle around the pool property and female spectators encouraged. Once the braver women start swimming, the first often floating in their first lesson, the word spreads quickly.

Providing a free new swimsuit is a great motivator: if they can swim, they can keep it. In addition, at the end of the first lesson, each student is tasked to bring friend and then teach that person the lesson just learned; this provides an early opportunity to identify women and girls with leadership and teaching qualities. The Project frequently has mother-and-daughter pairs; it is not unusual for the younger of the two to end up as the teacher.

The most able are quickly advanced as student community swimming teachers and awarded internationally recognized qualifications to become the Project's teaching staff; they are paid a modest local wage, often the first money they will have ever earned.

How do you plan to strengthen your project in the next three years?

Christina:

The Project long-term aim is to make teaching swimming a self-financing activity.

It is planned to strengthen the Project in four ways:

- (1) increase the output of female community swimming teachers and swimmers,
- (2) secure additional funds for more teachers,

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(3) develop self-sustainability and self-financing through teaching synergies in the tourist industry and

(4) raise the profile of global drowning and this Project in-country to generate local micro-economic funding at community level for free swimming training.

Increased swimming teacher output would be achieved by running full-time residential training courses, eliminating daily and weekly travel expenses and skill loss due to long intervals between practice sessions, while learning rates and group dynamics improve training.

More teachers mean more swimmers. Deploying swimming teachers to other charities and out-of-season hotels with otherwise underutilized pools would broaden the geographical base of the Project. Raising the awareness of the scale of drowning should bring in more potential donors to the Project.

The tourist industry gives high priority to the provision of swimming pools but has a paucity of qualified pool attendant and maintenance staff. Project teachers could fill this market gap and extend their income by teaching tourists. The Project has already piloted use of hotel pools for teaching local women.

Finally, publicity is the oxygen of charity; the Project would continue to devote all possible energy to raising drowning awareness by publishing articles, features and scientific research papers.

How do you specifically tackle the barriers challenging your Project?

Christina:

There is no shortcut – swimming teachers still have to be taught how to float and swim first.

Teaching women to swim certainly overcomes the cultural restrictive norm; older is quicker – if granny can do it, everybody learns! Sensitivities over swimsuits have been overcome by adding leggings and removable skirts.

Interestingly, the women often ask for a photograph of themselves swimming because nobody in the village believes they can. Swimming is very photogenic, newspaper articles give positive endorsement to the women's achievements.

One difficult unsolved problem is the perception that Pale is Lovely; skins darken dramatically in the tropics and the teachers complain most. The Project will explore a partnership with the cosmetic industry for Sun Factor XXXX.

Are you trying to scale up your organization or initiative? Christina:

Christina:

Absolutely.

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Growing the geographical reach of the Project is on a pool-by-pool basis, village by village.

A residential facility is also being established at this very moment to extend the reach considerably.

The Project works closely with Swimming Teachers Associations and the Australian Lifesavers to exert influence over gender issues specific to rural and coastal drowning problems in this part of the developing world.

The project also has good experience of leverage technology. The application of small ship bow-thruster technology to a swimming pool makes it possible to turn a small inexpensive swimming pool into an endless swimming distance. Pool volume expands costs exponentially, so a swim current generator at \$7K is a high priority cost effective item for the Project to acquire a Fast Lane unit from the USA.

Do you have any collaborators who have helped your innovation to succeed?

Christina:

Yes. Government involvement up to now has been small.

By contrast, local profit companies have played a key part with their generous donation of hundreds of new swimsuits which form part in the encouragement of cultural change.

Collaboration with NGOs, particularly in the swimming and life saving fraternity, has helped the Project acquire expensive training manikins, free course material for international qualifications and extensive advice and counselling.

Links to academia have assisted with the writing of reports and improved the articulation of the Project's case in the challenging market of charitable funding.

Most importantly, academia has given a scientific basis to my hitherto empirical belief that for the prevention of drowning, mastery of floating and breathing must come first.

Do you plan to go on with the Project?

Christina:

Absolutely. Yes.

That's fantastic. What do I have to do to donate to your Project?

Christina:

Just send me an email and I will send you a secure link. We are a Registered United Kingdom Charity No 1129236. We also like to post our donor's and supporters logos on our website as advertising helps them too, so be sure to give us your permission to do this.

