

## Beyond Public Pool Boundaries: Widening the Borders of Water Safety

*Written and submitted by Stephé McCormick,  
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If you're an aquatic supervisor, your phone is about to ring. It's not just the increased number of swim lessons and chemical deliveries as we head into summer. Research shows that interest in swimming is growing, and there are lots of different aquatic activities that people find enjoyable.

Yet, due to the demands on facility space and time, many parks and recreation departments can't provide for them all. Some direct their customers toward other avenues to meet those needs and interests. I have on many occasions pointed patrons to a competitive swim team, water polo club, diving program, SCUBA course, water therapist, or other aquatic specialty service provider.

That's easy. We may never even meet the person, but we leave the conversation with the warm happy feeling that we helped someone, that we served the customer.

Perhaps one day our kindness will be remembered and they'll be back for something we do offer. But the home pool owner in need of our help is

a whole other animal. One Backyard Lifeguards client recently told me, "I called everyone. And everyone said no. Many of them weren't even nice to me."

We all get those pleading calls from desperate home pool owners in search of a lifeguard for hire. Perhaps they've already agreed to host the end-of-school-year party (tomorrow!), or promised their child a swimming birthday, or know from experience that things can get a little rowdy when the in-laws are over for Fourth of July.

Aquatic supervisors usually commend these callers for their safety-conscious choice, but offer a "nice no". There are a million good reasons why we can't, don't, and won't broker our lifeguards. The answers run the gamut from workplace equality and host liability to departmental policy and yes, safety. Even during our busiest season, we really want to help, but we just

can't, and responding to the same request summer after summer can be frustrating. Ultimately, we accept that these pool owners may never utilize, nor pay for, our facilities or programs, and we move on.

This leaves private pool owners to go it alone in the hunt for a lifeguard. Signs go up. Lifeguard offices are invaded. And while aquatic professionals can explain in detail why they consider it dangerous—for their organization and their employees—for their staff members to work at a private home, that doesn't stop individual lifeguards from doing it anyway, at considerable risk to themselves, their families, their organizations, and our industry.

I admit I am no exception. In the 1980's and

90's, I took those gigs all the time. Back then the requests weren't printed on a color inkjet; frequently it was handwritten and torn from a spiral notebook. Sometimes a person would approach me on the pool deck, remark on my lifeguarding, and make me an offer. And I, a teenager, seduced by compliments and pay twice my regular wages, and guilted into wondering what might



happen without me . . . well, I couldn't refuse.

They were horrible jobs. One woman refused to pay me when the weather was "iffy" and the children chose not to swim. She told me, "Well, you did have cake." One really creepy guy swore he knew my parents and wouldn't stop chatting me up. And how could I forget the mother that left six children in the pool unsupervised while I taught a crying child who refused to let go of me?

As a lifeguard, I felt uncomfortable. I wasn't assertive enough to insist on proper payment, nor proactive enough to draw up a contract. And even if I had been, I wasn't informed enough to know what to include. At that age and experience level, I had no idea how uncomfortable I really should have felt. Because it was all on me. I was the one assuming all of the risk. If anything bad happened, no one had my back.

Today's lifeguards are in the same position. Wooed by big money for a short shift, many of them are genuinely concerned for water safety and eager to please. But as one of our own Backyard Lifeguards is fond of saying, "They just don't know what they don't know."

For example, they don't know all that we as supervisors do for them. They don't know that in addition to motivating positive workplace behavior just by our presence, we inspect equipment and write emergency action plans and create rotation schedules that give them breaks, not to be cool, but for a reason. They have no idea the limits of their attention span when asked to stand in one place for two whole hours or longer. They sometimes can't fathom that their job performance is completely different after a good night's sleep and a healthy breakfast than after an all-nighter and a can of Red Bull®. And they really don't get that they simply cannot meet the average person's expectations of a lifeguard with just a swimsuit and a whistle. Standard equipment includes a rescue tube, backboard, AED, and everything else that we provide and the public now demands.

It is in the public interest to provide for safety in public places, and aquatic supervisors have that down pat. But what about towns where the cubic volume of water in private pools outnumbers that of the municipal pool? St. Louis County has nearly 15,000 residential pools. By and large, we agree with their owners: lifeguards have a positive effect on water safety. So do we. They see us as experts in aquatic supervision. So do we. They live in the boundaries of our town, pay taxes to support the aquatic facilities that we supply and manage, and see themselves as our customers. And there's the rub. Because they don't come and use our pools, we often don't feel any obligation or responsibility to meet their needs.

Statistics show that 80% of drownings occur on private property. That leaves a huge gap between what we do for our patrons and what our resident non-patrons are left to do for themselves. Maybe it's time to think about the boundaries of our commitment to water safety. Are there limits? If we are truly committed to preventing aquatic injury and death, then perhaps we should be mindful of all the water inside our town borders. Maybe we can't be satisfied that our entire community is safe based only on what happens at the community pool.

Backyard Lifeguards was inspired by all of these needs:

- to help home pool owners access professional services;
- to help departments satisfy customers while protecting their own organizations and staff;
- to help lifeguards understand choices that may put them at risk; and
- to ensure that lifeguarding is represented properly.

Backyard Lifeguards is your backup. We take the show on the road, spreading the message of water safety to places that would otherwise go without professional supervision. The response has been overwhelmingly positive. And our phones are ringing, too.



## NW Region Trivia Night

The NW Region hosted an MPRA Trivia Night in Lee's Summit. 10 teams participated in the "Mardi Gras" themed event. The Blue Springs team (top) showed up in style! Despite their creative "thinking caps", it was the Pleasant Hill/Grain Valley/Lee's Summit combo team (pictured directly above) in first place when the night was over. The big winner is MPRA! The Association received \$1,200 from the event.

*Great job, NW Region!*