

# Retarded Children Taught To Swim

By Margaret Koch

You may not have heard much about it, but there are some local people who are doing a truly fine thing, every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon. Under the leadership of Pauline McNeely of the Red Cross, Rita Mattei of Branciforte Elementary school and Roger Baer of the city recreation department, a group of 17 women go to the Seaside Plunge on those afternoons to teach a class of mentally handicapped children to swim.

These 17 women instructors are all busy mothers with families of normal, average children. And several of the mothers were non-swimmers themselves, before Pauline McNeely got them interested in helping children less fortunate than their own.

How did Mrs. McNeely do it? Well, it's a tremendous job of organization. First, she sat down and wrote 25 letters to mothers she knew personally. She set a date for a meeting — February 4 — and asked each mother who could swim to bring another mother who couldn't. During the meeting, pictures were shown and the project was carefully outlined. In asking for their help, Mrs. McNeely also explained to them that they must take swimming instruction every Tuesday morning for six weeks; themselves, before they could qualify as instructors. This training program for the mothers was headed by Water Safety Instructor Pauline McNeely, assisted by Mrs. Dorothy O'Reilly, W.S.I.; Miss Rita Haile, W.S.I., and Mrs. Diane Gunter, W.S.A.

The mother-instructors who graduated from the class to become teachers for the retarded children are Mrs. Tom Cutting, Mrs. Sam Gordon, Mrs. Bill Graham, Mrs. Roy Bergazzi, Mrs. Emma Alrough, Mrs. John Dawson, Mrs. Edward Diener, Mrs. George Atwood, Mrs. Les Ley, Mrs. Warren Littlefield, Mrs. George Castleberry, Mrs. Ken Katz, Mrs. George Atton, Mrs. Kenneth Johnson, Miss Ruth Smith, Mrs. Virginia Perry and Mrs. Caroline Nelson.

Then came the important day — April 8. A school bus brought the 16 children of the special training class at Branciforte Elementary and Gault school, to the Seaside Plunge at 2 o'clock.

"We could feel the tension in the air, the minute the children arrived," explained Mrs. McNeely. "Many of these children are high-strung. They have lots of nervous energy to spend, and what better way is there than swimming? In the water, the mentally retarded child is no different from the normal child."

This all sounds easy, the way it is written down here. But behind the whole project lay the cooperation of many people and several organizations. The Red Cross and the city recreation department have been mentioned. But how about the free use of the Plunge? And how about the towels, bathing suits and caps for those who have none? And just getting the children home after the lessons was a problem because school buses are not available

at that time of day. So the Kiwanis club, the Seaside company, the city schools and mothers with cars all play an important part in his swim program.

Now, about the actual steps involved in teaching these exceptional children to swim. (The term exceptional applies to any child who varies from the normal.) How did they start? Pauline McNeely explained it carefully.

"The first day, each instructor took an assigned child by the hand and led him into the pool. All the children were afraid of the water, except three," she added. She went on to say that actual instruction can't start until the child is able to put his head under the water without fear. "There can't be a regular day by day schedule," she pointed out. "You have to feel your way, with these children." The whole time she was answering questions, her eyes were on the children in the pool at our feet.

This trim instructor doesn't miss anything. Not even the small boy who persisted in standing by the gushing fountain at the end of the tank. He wouldn't swim. He wouldn't practice his "steamboating." He just wanted to stand there. His instructor tried casually a few times, but finally she gave up temporarily and went over to the fountain to stand with him. Patience is endless in this class. And so is understanding.

Then there's the story about the red bathing cap. One little girl refused to try to learn to swim because she didn't have a red cap like "Pauley's," as the children call Pauline McNeely. So the very next lesson, there was a new, red cap for that girl, and she is swimming like a fish these days.

It's a noisy place, the plunge, when there are 11 small boys and 5 small girls all learning to swim at once. The more advanced ones were learning to jump in from the edge, and their joy in a new accomplishment was plain to see. With cries of "Watch me do this," they plopped into the water where their instructors waited with suggestions and help if they needed it.

Speaking of accomplishments, Carl Bengston of the city recreation department came over to watch the class, and his observation was concise and to the point.

"This is the first time some of these kids have ever accomplished something on their own," he said. Just think about that for a minute. The first thing, in a

world of things, that they are able to do and do well. This was their fifth lesson, and they were all swimming. Some better than others, but nevertheless, swimming.

At the deeper end of the pool, Roger Baer was directing two larger boys who swam quite well, and he never took his eyes from them while he talked.

"Did you notice how keyed up these children were before they came in?" he asked. Indeed I had. They are quick as lightning in their movements, and they had been all over the boardwalk steps at once. Several tried to explore under the foundation of the building while waiting for the plunge doors to open. Mrs. McNeely and Baer had their hands full, just keeping the group together.

"When they finish their lesson, they are much more relaxed," Baer observed. "Swimming is good therapy for them, as well as being an important safety measure."

While we talked, Pauline McNeely had taken off her new tennis shoes and placed them near the edge of the pool. One of the smaller boys was patting them and admiring them.

"See that," she pointed out. "Two weeks ago I wore those new shoes down here for the first time, and that same boy threw water on them and acted in a very antagonistic manner. So last week I wore my old ones, and he asked me right away where my new shoes were." She paused to give some instructions to one of the children, then continued, "We try to understand these children. After almost every lesson, I have a conference with Rita Mattei. She knows a lot about why they do some of the things they do. You must be sure to talk to her about this class."

When they were interviewed, each one of them — Baer, Bengston and the instructors had wound up saying the same thing: "Talk to Rita Mattei." So I did.

As principal of Branciforte Elementary school and Director of the Aid Retarded Children Camp at La Honda each summer, Miss Mattei is a busy person. But not too busy to do anything within her power to develop the public's understanding of these special children.

"Our biggest job," she said, is to make better people out of parents and lay persons." She went on to explain. "These mentally retarded children are not necessarily different children. But they are children with a different problem." When asked

about the proportion of boys to girls (over 2 to 1), Miss Mattei said they didn't know why, but the proportion of boys is usually higher.

Miss Mattei, who was instrumental in starting the first special training class in Santa Cruz in 1948, has her master's degree on the exceptional child. She became interested in these children who cannot achieve, early in her teaching career. Another point she stressed as most important for people to understand, is the fact that mental retardation is not necessarily mental illness. And she also pointed out that mental retardation is no respecter of color, creed or financial status. It can be a problem in any family. Usually it is evident early in life, she commented. Sometimes erratic behavior, disciplinary problems and a short attention span are the factors that bring it to the teacher's attention. When asked about the strong feeling of group awareness in the special class, Miss Mattei said that it was due to teachers the children have had.

"We are fortunate in Santa Cruz to have really fine teachers for these children. And we are fortunate in having people like

Pauline McNeely. This swimming class has given these children one more use for their leisure time. And that's important," she added.

Now, back to the Plunge for the end of the swimming lesson. At three o'clock the children left the water with the same dragging reluctance children show anywhere they have enjoyed themselves. Baer herded the boys off in one direction while the girls went the other. When they came out in their school clothes, Pauline McNeely handed each child a bright red and white folder from the Red Cross, titled "Progress Report." Inside the folder there are funny-book types of pictures portraying the different aspects of learning to swim, and a cross to color red when the child has mastered a particular skill. The children were quieter. Their goodbyes were subdued. It was easy to see they left this wonderful place with regret.

And as they were leaving the plunge, someone standing nearby remarked that it was not a very large project, as far as size goes. But size isn't everything. Sometimes quality is more important. And the quality of this swim project is terrific!

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