2021 Tokyo Paralympic Swimmer Gives Swimming Lessons to Boys and Girls Club in Pasadena

STAFF REPORT

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The Boys and Girls Club of Pasadena (BGCP) has teamed up with the Swim Up Hill Foundation (SUHF) Inc., founded by 2021 Tokyo Paralympic Swimmer Jamal Hill, to bring swim education to the youth of Pasadena’s District 3 community.

Up to 40 children will be taught how to swim by program staff using the Swim Up Hill method across four days of instruction. The unique curriculum is designed to meet “will-be” swimmers where they currently are – fearful, nervous, and timid – and transform their learn-to-swim experience into a simple and enjoyable activity that’s guaranteed to positively shift their outlook on aquatics and future challenges in life, Jamal Hill said.

“Swim Up Hill Foundation is an organization organized to teach one million people how to swim all around the world every year, focusing on BIPOC (the acronym stands for Black, Indigenous, People of Color) communities and lower- and middle-income areas,” Hill said. “Essentially, what we do is we take the fear, the time consumption, the expensiveness, the access, all these words and concerns out of some education to make it simple, quick and easy to teach and be ready to swim in five hours.”

Hill was only 10 years old when his body started to fail him. He experienced total paralysis, and doctors diagnosed him with Charcot-Marie-Tooth (CMT), a hereditary neurological condition that can result in progressive loss of muscle tissue and touch sensation in the body.

CMT threatened to alter Hill’s entire life, but through sheer will, faith and determination, he not only regained his mobility but has been at the top of his game as a competitive swimmer. Today, at 26, the Los Angeles native is ranked No. 1 in the U.S. Paralympic 50 Free and No.3 in the world.

Hill developed a love for swimming through a local YMCA Mommy and Me swim class. It was evident from them that he was a natural born swimmer. After his paralysis and recovery, his parents encouraged him to use CMT as an opportunity to overcome challenges and inspire others.

The Swim Up Hill Foundation’s partnership with the Boys and Girls Club of Pasadena is the first of many intended to bring increased swim accessibility to the city of Pasadena and its residents, according to a Swim Up Hill Foundation statement.
BGCP serves about 2,000 youth per year in grades 1 through 12. Club members are ages 6 to 18 and are very diverse, representing the racial and ethnic make-up of the community. The demographic breakdown of BGCP members is 53% Hispanic/Latino, 23% Black/African American, 7% White, 5% Asian, and 8% Bi-racial/Multi-racial. Of all members, 82% are from low- to moderate-income families, and many will be the first in their families to attend college.

BGCP members reside in the Pasadena area, with the majority attending Pasadena Unified School District.

This week, the partnership is doing two workshops for the younger kids, about 6 to 10, and older kids from 12 to 18.

“Pretty much it’s teaching them how to swim, giving them those saving skills and making it fun, allowing them to obviously meet me, a professional swimmer, and some of my team and staff,” Hill said. “So ultimately, we’re trying to make sure that there aren’t any more stories that happened like this summer, that the ones coming out are ones who, you know, ‘Hey, I know how to swim. That means I can do anything now.’”

A recent study conducted by USA Swimming identified that 79% of children coming from family units earning $50,000 or less annually do not know how to swim. More often than not, the parents also can’t swim and try to protect their children by avoiding the water or delaying swim education until the child gets older.

“It’s heartbreaking to know that some of our youth never have the opportunity to ‘get older’ because of how quickly and unexpectedly an accidental drowning can occur,” the Swim Up Hill statement said.

The joint Learn-to-Swim event is strategically broken into two sessions. One will be taught virtually using SUHF’s “Splash at Home” program, where children will learn the essential swimming mechanics of breathing, stroke path, and timing, using a bowl, bench and two buckets of water. This portion of the Swim Up Hill method builds confidence in crucial skills and allows students to safely practice uncomfortable situations like getting water up their nose without becoming overwhelmed. The second in-pool session is set to follow in the BGCP Mackenzie-Scott Branch’s aquatic facility. All students who attend the event will be supplied with swimsuits, swim caps, and googles generously donated by Speedo, a SUHF partner.

“It’s great to be able to directly pour back into the community that has supported myself and many other elite swimmers in our Olympic and Paralympic journey over the past few years,” Hill said. “Swimming is a skill that has saved my life, earned me employment, and placed me on a platform to ensure that kids worldwide gain the same opportunities by promoting the value and accessibility of universal swim education.”

The SUHF emphasizes the importance of swim education as a life-saving skill that must be taught to every child. The foundation believes that swimming should be taught as an education standard in schools to best prepare children.

“I think the Boys and Girls Club of Pasadena has been really one of our partners for the past two years,” Hill said. “Actually I’m an Inglewood native myself. But because of this, pools are kind of hard to come by. I’ve been training at that Boys and Girls Club for the past two years. And so they’re a big reason that I’m even in the Paralympics this year and have an opportunity to represent our country.”

To support the work of the Swim Up Hill Foundation Inc. and increase swim education in Pasadena, contact jhill@swimuphill.org or call (310) 367-6401.