



Breaking Barriers in Aquatics: Empowering Youth and Expanding Access.



► OVERVIEW

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), drowning rates for Black individuals under the age 30 are 1.5 times higher than for their White peers. In regards to lifeguard representation, Black “lifeguards & other recreational & protective service workers” made up roughly 5% of these roles in 2023 (Data USA). Locally, staff observed the same disparity: **many youth who wanted to be lifeguards but had little to no swimming experience**. This challenge sparked an innovative response: a peer-to-peer “learn to swim” initiative designed to promote equity, access, and community connection while building the next generation of lifeguards.

► TAKING ACTION

In partnership with Brooklyn Center Community Schools, the **Aquatics team created a reciprocal learning model where youth both teach and learn from one another**. The team, led by **Rori Conners**, Aquatics Supervisor, has taken tremendous strides in building the program from the ground up. They begin with foundational swim lessons and build toward lifeguard readiness through small-group coaching, mentorship, and life-skill development.



► MAKING AN IMPACT

The results speak for themselves:

- **17 youth taught since fall 2024.**
- **29 enrolled for the current semester.**
- **3 youth hired into aquatics roles.**
- **24% of staff identify as Black or African American (up from 17% in the previous year).**

Beyond the numbers, the program is changing perceptions. **Youth are discovering that swimming is for them—that they can become lifeguards or swim instructors**, earn good wages doing so, and serve their own communities. Word is spreading, with students recruiting their peers to join.

LESSONS LEARNED & LOOKING AHEAD ...

- Be flexible. Adapting lessons to meet youth where they are.
- Build trust. Treat teens as partners, not kids. Take time to get to know and build a relationship beyond the swimming pool.
- Keep equity at the center. Representation and access change lives.

The next step is hiring youth as Water Safety Aids and supporting them on the path to lifeguard certification. With continued partnerships and intentional outreach at the school, this initiative is helping to redefine who belongs in aquatics—and making the water a more welcoming place for everyone.



Building Trust, One Connection at a Time.



► OVERVIEW

For **Charles Walker**, connection comes first. Before joining the City of Brooklyn Center, Charles worked in the school as a Restorative Specialist, helping students repair relationships and conflict resolution. The same commitment carried over when he joined the City part-time—eventually becoming the Parks and Recreation Outreach Manager leading programs built on trust, respect, and accountability. **At the heart of Charles's work is a simple principle: Respect.**

► FROM SCHOOLS TO CITY CONNECTION

In 2021, the City of Brooklyn Center and Brooklyn Center Community Schools joined efforts together in a dedicated Outreach position to strengthen school connections even further with the city. That effort grew into a yearlong part-time role that helped anchor trust and consistency between youth, school, and the city.

► CREATING SAFE AND POSITIVE SPACES

Every day, Charles interacts with more than 100 youth at the school, Monday through Friday, building relationships that go beyond the classroom. **Through open gym and Teen Nights on Wednesdays, he provides safe, structured spaces where young people can gather, have fun, and feel supported.**

Youth know that being part of the activities means showing respect—at home, school, and in community spaces. They also know that if they make mistakes, there are boundaries, but also opportunities to make things right. The focus isn't on punishment; it's on guidance, accountability, and care. Building trust takes time, but when youth see adults who are "100%" with them, they open up. They share concerns, look out for one another, and even take responsibility for keeping their spaces safe. Charles also connects with parents to bridge relationships and set clear boundaries.

Through consistency and care, he's helped create a culture where youth build relationships with one another and understand that these spaces are not just hangouts—they're opportunities to grow, belong, and be seen.



LESSONS LEARNED & LOOKING AHEAD ...

Charles's next goal is to **establish a dedicated youth space—a place for discussions**, shared meals, and community. He believes in meeting youth where they are and giving them something to look forward to every day. His work reminds everyone in Brooklyn Center that when you lead with respect, trust follows—and that's how real change begins.



Growing with Purpose: How We're Building a More Inclusive Community.



► OVERVIEW

The City of Brooklyn Center's Parks and Recreation Department has had an ongoing journey for several years now to expand access. When **Cordell Wiseman** joined the city in 2021, he brought more than 30 years of experience in government and parks, along with a deep passion for engaging youth and building strong relationships within the community. His leadership marked a pivotal step in advancing the city's ongoing work around access and inclusion. From the beginning, **Carissa Goebel**, Deputy Director of Parks and Recreation, and the team developed an action plan to ensure that this work was approached intentionally. The shared commitment to doing this work "intentionally" has guided each step since.

► INITIAL HAPPENINGS

Early efforts began with discussions about expanded access and how to meaningfully embed it into general operations. In 2022, the City instituted Juneteenth as an organizational holiday—one of our first visible commitments. **Early conversations focused on who we serve and how to shape programs to meet community needs.** In 2023, a unique opportunity with the Hennepin County Statewide Health Improvement Partnership (SHIP) initiative & the Brooklyn Bridge Alliance for Youth provided **a structured framework for learning, reflection, and collaborative implementation.**



► KEY IMPACTS

Since SHIP's launch in 2023, have engaged in intentional conversations about expanded access and inclusion. It has helped:

- **Bridge new ways of thinking about programming and services**
- **Shift mindsets and encourage creativity and openness**
- **Increase community engagement and understanding of why equity matters**
- **Build staff capacity and partnerships with local schools**

LESSONS LEARNED & LOOKING AHEAD

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- This work is broad and ongoing. We can't solve it all at once, but small, intentional shifts make meaningful change.
- Feedback matters. Gathering community input strengthens programs and impacts.
- Learning is collective. Learning happens at all levels; everyone contributes to building understanding.

As we move forward, our focus is on embedding expanded access into our everyday work. Sustaining intentionality will require continued reflection, collaboration, and accountability. Key next steps include:

- Integrating equity principles into onboarding for new staff.
- Ensuring sustainability by weaving access goals into ongoing planning and evaluation.
- Continuing to build connection—with the city, community partners, and other departments—to align and strengthen our shared impact.