

12/18/12

I attended a 2-day Diversity Summit on September 29-September 30, 2012 in Cherry Hill, NJ. This summit was organized by Danielle Bordi, former world ranked swimmer and now coach and founder of the Urban Swim Program in Camden. Danielle is also the Diversity Chair for Middle Atlantic Swimming. This conference focused primarily on defining and distinguishing the difference between “diversity” and “inclusion” as it pertains to sports, particularly swimming. Historically, efforts to diversify sports tend to focus on the numbers and emphasis and energy are often placed on “recruitment” rather than “retention”.

The keynote speaker at this conference was Dr. Jenny Lind Withycombe, leader of advanced diversity workshops for the NCAA. Day 1 of the conference consisted of a 5-hour Diversity and Inclusion Workshop conducted by Dr. Withycombe and involved discussions and group activities relating to defining and understanding the dynamics of diversity, culture, and inclusion.

The second day of the conference included several speakers representing distinctly different areas of our society but all had the common goal of encouraging and promoting diversity and inclusion in the sport of swimming. Lt James DeLeon, Regional Coast Guard Diversity Manager, spoke of the positive benefits of diversifying, not only our Coast Guard but, the armed forces in general. The exposure of people of different races, cultures, gender, religions, and socio-economic status to swimming results in a more diverse population seeking to enter the coast guard and other branches of our armed forces such as the navy and marines.

Richard Butler, U.S. Rowing Inclusion Manager, spoke on the increased number of people of all ages, but mainly children and young adults, who are increasingly participating in the sport of rowing at many levels due to programs which he himself has been instrumental in developing. Mr. Butler pointed out that many scholarship opportunities exist today at the collegiate level, especially for women.

Travis Pollen, Disability Chair for Massachusetts and, himself a paraplegic, spoke about his experience as a competitive swimmer with a physical limitation. With the use of only one leg, Mr. Pollen managed to successfully compete at the high school and college level and to try out for the 2012 Paralympics. Mr. Pollen’s drive, dedication, and determination are impressive and inspiring. He would be a motivational speaker for swimmers of all backgrounds and abilities.

Coaches Jim Ellis of Salvation Army Kroc Aquatics and John Mason of Central Chesapeake Swimming, shared their methods for recruiting and retaining diverse swimmers in urban areas. Both coaches relate that involving the swimmers’ families in the process and experience is tantamount to retaining them. Coach Ellis’ vision is to take an all female team to Nationals in the years to come.

I left this summit knowing that I need to become better informed about efforts under way in my own LSC to expose, include, and retain as many under represented athletes, coaches, and officials in our sport. At the end of the conference, we were encouraged to consider and develop a plan of action for making positive changes to address this need. A resounding message throughout this weekend is that in order to achieve the balance we are seeking in inclusion and diversity, we need to pay attention to the quality of our efforts. Quantity alone is not enough.

Rosa Trinidad-Nedd