

Az Giving: A Swim for Safety

Written by Written by Kirstina Bolton/Picture: Payton Mueller and Joe Zemaitis

One child is out to prove the significance of water safety by doing what he does best—swim.



On April 14, 10-year-old Payton Mueller from Laguna Elementary in Scottsdale joined other youngsters to swim from Alcatraz Island to San Francisco. It's been said that Alcatraz housed some of the fiercest criminals of its day and those who attempted to escape were swallowed by the menacing ocean separating the island from San Francisco one and half miles away. Decades later, Alcatraz remains standing as a national preserve and Mueller and friends braved the waters between the two lands—not as an escape route (the prison has long since closed), but rather to raise awareness about drowning.

Each year, more than 20 children in Arizona drown because they do not know proper water safety and are not under proper supervision. Mueller, a member of local swim team, Swim Neptune, took to the San Francisco Bay for The Foundation for Aquatic Safety and Training's (F.A.S.T.) annual swim that gives a voice to this all-too-common death.

Mueller's talent was realized long before the Alcatraz Island swim. "I swam before I could walk, and I took some lessons at six months old so it's always been like a gift or something," Mueller says. Last August, he joined Swim Neptune, and under the guidance of the swim coach and founder, Joe Zemaitis, Mueller's talent took flight—or fins, rather. "It takes a special, determined, focused kid, not only to be a competitive swimmer but also another level with knowing the safety elements of open water," Zemaitis says.

Training for the F.A.S.T. swim involved drills in the pool as well as a several wintertime trips to Bartlett Lake to give the 50-plus young swimmers an idea of the San Francisco Bay's water temperature. "The water was probably 48 degrees at the coldest," Mueller says. They learned not only about swimming in cold water, but about understanding how the body reacts to temperature change and taking the necessary precautions prior, during and after each swim to ensure water safety.

The swim from Alcatraz Island to the San Francisco shore is roughly one and half miles; however, the current adds another half mile, making this two-mile swim in nearly 50-degree water not something for the faint of heart. Police on personal watercrafts and safety boats kept an eye on all participants as they took their leap off Alcatraz Island during the brisk California morning at 6:50 a.m.

Zemaitis, who is well-seasoned in the swim route, joined Mueller and the others for the swim. "I have actually done the swim 28 times now," Zemaitis says. "And every time, it's totally different." It took Mueller 32 minutes to finish the swim. What's more, the very next day, he swam the length of the Golden Gate Bridge in 28 minutes. "I actually wasn't really tired," Mueller says. "We went back to the hotel, and I took a shower like I usually would and then we went into the city."

Mueller's gift of swimming only reflects his passion of advocating for children's water safety, and he plans to continue to use it as a tool to raise awareness about safety in and outside the water.

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