



Sasha Rosenthal, 2½, grins after swimming to the wall for safety in her family's pool. She was enrolled in Infant Swimming Resource's Roll-Back-to-Float program at 18 months old.

PHOTO COURTESY OF NANCY ROSENTHAL



"Ultimately, she has three ways to get air," says Barbara Gorman, here with student Maren Schriver, 2½. "She swims to the wall. She swims to the steps. Or she swims and then floats on her back to get air."

# Water survival

Infant Swimming Resource is an innovative educational program that teaches self-rescue skills to kids 6 months to 6 years old.

By NAILA FRANCIS  
STAFF WRITER

Patricia Lapa and her family were vacationing in Brigantine, N.J., last year, when her 3-year-old son Vincent ventured into the bay.

A self-proclaimed water baby — Lapa was swimming competitively by the age of 6 — with an extended family of pool owners and beach lovers, she felt comfortable letting her kids roam the water's edge as she watched nearby.

And so when Vincent walked into the bay, she thought nothing of it — until he was swallowed by a dip in the sand created by a recent coastal storm.

"He was standing in there, playing with the water, and all of a sudden, he dipped down," recalls Lapa. "I didn't realize how bad it was until he completely fell in."

But the Upper Dublin mom didn't panic.

Within seconds, Vincent was on his back, bobbing in the water. Then without even the slightest acknowledgment of his mishap, he rolled back into the water and swam to his uncle's boat a few feet away.

"He handled it well," says Lapa. "He wasn't upset. He just flipped onto his back like he was trained to do."



It's a cloudless 90-degree day and 2½-year-old Maren Schriver is staring longingly at the pool where Barbara Gorman is giving lessons, awaiting her turn to get in.

When that moment comes, she slips into the water, effortlessly swimming the 24 feet across the pool, which, save for the first three steps in the shallow end, is too deep for her to stand.

As she gets tired, she rolls onto her back, catches her breath, and then returns to swimming — face down in the water, eyes open, her limbs propelling her with practiced ease.

Occasionally, she receives instruction from Gorman, an encouraging word here, a gentle touch there, but for the most part, Maren is content moving through the water on her own.

There are no inflatable armbands or life jackets, floats or trainers, or kick boards for little feet. Maren isn't even wearing goggles.

"It's amazing. She's so comfortable in the water. She just glides and floats," says her mom, Amanda Schriver, watching as her daughter exits the pool from the side and heads for the diving board, jumping fearlessly into the 10-foot deep end — a feat she giddily repeats twice more before returning to her lessons with Gorman.



Before Maren entered the pool, Gorman was in the water with her daughter Violet.

At only 7 months old, the infant was floating on her back, arms and legs outstretched, only the slight pressure of a few of her mother's fingers holding her every now and then.



KIM WEIMER / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

"It's not an instead-of. It's an in-addition-to," says Barbara Gorman of Infant Swimming Resource, as her 7-month-old daughter Violet practices her float. "It doesn't mean it's your child's responsibility to save themselves, but it's an added measure of safety, like seatbelts."

## Sobering statistics

■ In Pennsylvania and New Jersey, drowning is the second-leading cause of accidental death for children ages 1 to 4, behind only automobile accidents.

■ A swimming pool is 14 times more likely than a motor vehicle to be involved in the death of a child age 4 and under.

■ Of all preschoolers who drown, 70 percent are in the care of one or both parents at the time of drowning; 75 percent are missing from sight for five minutes or less.

■ Children ages 1 to 4 are most likely to drown in hot tubs, spas and swimming pools.

Source: Infant Swimming Resource

And, yes, at first she fussed, but eventually, those cries subsided. If her face became too submerged, she would lift her head, letting the water drain away. As she maintained good posture — chin up, head slightly elevated — and drew a breath, Gorman offered more support, holding her along the length of her forearms, the gesture serving as positive reinforcement.

"It's all about teaching them where their air and body's buoyancy is and how to stay buoyant," says the Maple Glen mother of three. "When (Violet) inhales, that fills her chest with air and that keeps her afloat."

If this doesn't sound like a typical swim lesson, it's because it isn't.

Gorman is an Infant Swimming Resource instructor, one of only a handful in the area trained to provide not just swimming lessons but self-rescue skills to kids 6 months to 6 years of age.

Rather than focus on swimming as a recreational activity, the educational program emphasizes aquatic safety and survival, working toward preventing the incidents of drowning that claim the lives of thousands of children each year.

"This is so different than any swim program out there, it's not really on people's radars," says Gorman, who received her training five years ago in Central New Jersey after a Google search led her to the Infant Swimming Resource website.

Living in a house with a large backyard pool and having just had her first child, Theo, Gorman had heeded her sister's concerns about the dangers of raising kids with a pool nearby. Although she admits that at the time she didn't fully grasp how treacherous it could be to have an infant in a house with a pool, once she stumbled upon the ISR site, she knew that she not only wanted lessons for Theo, she wanted to become an instructor herself.

See **SWIM**, Page D6

# These journeys of surrender reap unexpected rewards

Naila Francis



Life in LaLa Land

I know there are two camps: those who voraciously devoured every page of Elizabeth Gilbert's travelogue memoir "Eat Pray Love," weeping and yearning and rejoicing along with its heroine's every globe-trotting step — and those who have dismissed her entire odyssey as an exercise in supreme self-indulgence, with the privileged Gilbert's escape from the realities of her life a luxury few could afford.

The release of the movie "Eat Pray Love," starring Julia Roberts, has again drawn such divisions, with several mediocre to poor reviews counterbalanced by the praise of a faithful following only too happy to get caught up in Gilbert's excursions through Italy, India and Indonesia on the big screen. I admit I am a fan — of the book, of the movie, of the whole audacious concept of casting off the familiar to find what truly brings meaning and contentment to a life unconsciously shaped.

And, yes, some might argue that such inner pilgrimages can be taken much closer to home,

but I have come to believe that travel is among the great catalysts for transformation and renewal. It's not that I have done much of it or embarked on any grand adventures with the sole purpose of "finding myself" or being immersed in a revelatory experience that will somehow bring me to a long-sought personal or spiritual zenith.

But I have been surprised in recent years by how the suspension of expectation and agenda can allow a place to truly seep into the spaces of one's life, destinations as far-flung as Peru and as local as the Poconos offering themselves to me with unexpected gifts. It was with a trip to Hawaii three years ago that I first abandoned myself to this type of travel — the giddy pitch forward into the unknown, without the desire to thoroughly research where I was going or carve out every last detail of an itinerary. I decided that I would let my destination reveal itself to me rather than try to mold it to any preconceived ideas.

See **LALA**, Page D2



From the sea turtles on the black sand beaches of Pu'uhonua o Honaunau National Historical Park to the eerie majesty of the Kilauea volcano, The Big Island fed me with constant wonder.

# Swim

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“With programs like Mommy and Me and other groups, you’re teaching your kids that water is a playground first, rather than giving them life skills,” says Gorman, who became the first ISR instructor in Pennsylvania after undergoing six weeks of intensive study that included both academic and in-pool training. “With this, we’re teaching competence first, then confidence, then you can start enjoying the water.”



This summer, Sasha Rosenthal has gone swimming in her family pool at least three times a day.

Her mom Nancy Rosenthal says her youngest, at 2½ years, will be the first to tell anyone how good a swimmer she is.

“She wants to be in the pool all the time and she’s fast. She can really motor,” says Rosenthal, who enrolled Sasha in ISR lessons when she was 18 months old. “She has a real sense of pride about her.”

Her two older children had already taken swimming lessons when the family bought a home with a pool in Maple Glen.

“I’m a swimmer, but I didn’t grow up with a pool, so I was freaking out,” admits Rosenthal, who was pregnant with Sasha at the time. “I didn’t know what was required of a pool owner in general and I was very, very concerned about safety.”

When a friend referred her to ISR, she knew she would sign Sasha up after she was born. But while she delights in her daughter’s strong abilities as a swimmer, Rosenthal appreciates even more the sense of respect she has around the water.

“Once she became mobile, I thought, ‘She’s going to see us in the pool. She needs to understand about pool safety and pool awareness,’ and (ISR) did that,” says Rosenthal. “That really set the groundwork for her being aware that it’s a dangerous place.”

“She knows not to run by the pool or play with toys and that if someone’s standing by the pool and she needs to get by, to either ask them to move or wait until they’ve moved to get by. She really does enjoy the water, but for me, the biggest benefit has been that she also has a healthy fear of it.”

## FROM TRAGIC BEGINNINGS

ISR, developed in Florida in 1966 by professor and psychologist Harvey Barnett, takes a scientifically proven approach to teaching infants and young children how to save their own lives.

Based on psychology, behavioral science, anatomy and physiology, it delivers one-on-one 10-minute training sessions five days a week for four to six weeks to teach them to become “aquatic problem solvers.”

“This is not your average swimming class,” says Melody Callaway, director of media relations and communications for ISR. “We’re teaching self-rescue skills — so if a child ends up in the water alone, they know how to save themselves.”

“The first thing we teach them is how to get to the air. We’re teaching them how to breathe first ... so that if they were to accidentally fall in, they know how to get to the air.”

The seed for ISR was planted after a child in Barnett’s neighborhood drowned in a drainage canal.

“He came home from life-guarding and they were putting the child in the ambulance in a body bag,” says Callaway. “And from that day on, he vowed that not one more child would drown.”

## THE HARD FACTS

But the sad reality is that many do, with drowning claiming the lives of approximately 4,000 children each year and leaving another 12,000 with some form of permanent brain damage. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ranks drowning as the second-leading cause of injury-related death among children under the age of 15.

“Drowning is the No. 1 cause of accidental death for children between the ages of 1 and 3, so for the population that is most at risk, if parents aren’t getting their children into swimming lessons until they’re 4 or 5, they’re missing a huge opportunity to teach their kids these survival skills,” says Callaway, noting ISR has 790 documented cases in which a child has used the skills learned to save his own life.

She also points to studies in the Archives of Pediatrics and

Adolescent Medicine indicating that 1- to 4-year-olds who take swimming lessons have an 88 percent less likely risk of drowning than their non-swimming peers.

And while the American Academy of Pediatrics had previously held that children are not developmentally ready for swimming lessons until after their fourth birthday, it has since reversed that position (though the AAP still advises parents to determine on a case-by-case basis whether their kids are ready for swimming lessons or water-survivals skills training at a younger age).

## TRAINING FOR REAL LIFE

For parents who discover ISR, the skills their kids learn are invaluable. Before falling into the bay in Brigantine, Vincent had already tumbled into his uncle’s pool on two separate occasions.

“But he comes over to the steps, gets out, grabs his ball and goes back in,” says Lapa. “The first time he fell in, he just flipped on his back and called ‘Mom.’ He was completely calm. ... He knows how to swim, he knows how to roll onto his back if he needs a breath. It’s just a relief to know that if you have to turn your back for a minute, he knows how to help himself.”

ISR classes are broken into two categories: the Roll-Back-to-Float for infants 6 to 12 months old and the Swim-Float-Swim for children 1 to 6 years old.

In the former, infants learn how to hold their breath under water, roll onto their back and then float unassisted, resting and breathing as they wait for help to arrive.

With Swim-Float-Swim, children also learn how to hold their breath under water and roll onto their back to float, rest and breathe. But they also learn how to swim with their head down and how to resume swimming once they’ve rested on their backs in order to reach the side of the pool or some safe boundary where they can be rescued by an adult.

## Finding an instructor

Visit [www.infantsswim.com](http://www.infantsswim.com) to find an instructor in your area. For more information on Barbara Gorman, visit [www.survivalsswim.com](http://www.survivalsswim.com).

Note that while Infant Swimming Resource has 400 instructors in the U.S., there is a national waiting list of about 20,000 parents. Only three instructors serve the Greater Philadelphia area: Gorman; Amy Reardon, who teaches at the Upper Main Line YMCA in Berwyn; and Diane Taggart, who teaches through word-of-mouth in the Newtown Township area.

Children first learn these skills in a swim suit or swim diaper and then fully clothed. As the culmination in the ISR program, Gorman’s students practice their skills with a range of seasonal clothing: light summer wear; long pants, a long-sleeved coat and jacket that would be worn in the fall; and then heavy winter gear, complete with a hat, mittens and a coat.

“Kids fall in the water when they’re not supposed to,” she says, recounting the story of a boy who followed his Christmas puppy, out of the house and into a pond in the family’s backyard one morning, and was found already floating on his back by the time his dad got to him.

“This is so if it happens, they can say, ‘Oh, I know what this is. I’ve done this before,’” says Gorman, who teaches in the Ambler area.

The absence of goggles follows similar reasoning.

“We don’t swim with goggles,” she says, “because in an accident, you’re not going to have goggles. If you don’t have your eyes open, you can’t swim to safety or to a wall or a ladder.”

## CUSTOMIZED FOR KIDS

The brevity of the lessons, at only 10 minutes, is geared as much to safety as it is a child’s natural attention span.

Instruction involves sensory-motor learning, with light touch and minimal verbal cues to develop children’s muscle memory, allowing for that initial learning to kick in should they ever find themselves in danger.

“Ten minutes is ample time to be in the water. If they prac-

tice when they’re tired, they develop bad habits and you don’t want to give the message that it’s OK to go swimming when you’re tired,” says Gorman. “Five days a week is so they can hone what they learned the day before and build upon it. Everything is done in teeny-tiny increments so we never ask something of them that they’re not able to accomplish.”

Gorman has witnessed that muscle memory at work firsthand, when her son Mac, now 3, fell into the family pool at 8 months old and then a kiddie pool at a resort two months later. During both instances, he rolled onto his back and floated until she got to him. Theo, who is now 6, practiced his Swim-Float-Swim technique after getting apprehensive about sharks while snorkeling on a family vacation. All of 3 at the time, he decided he’d feel more comfortable on his back.

“You feel nervous, you feel anxious, you feel unsettled, you get onto your back and float,” says Gorman. “If you have nothing to hold onto, your float is your bread and butter.”

That ISR also teaches kids to be horizontal in the water is another of the program’s important distinctions.

“We always keep them horizontal so they’re using the body’s buoyancy,” says Gorman. “Bubbles, armbands and life jackets all hold kids in a vertical position. It gives them a false sense of security and puts them in a sinking position. As soon as you take those away, they go down.”

While the traditional doggie paddle is also popular with par-

ents looking to give their kids a greater sense of confidence in the water, Gorman advises against it, noting that it also tends toward a more vertical position and is just plain exhausting.

## A WORTHY COMMITMENT

She acknowledges that the ISR program can be initially daunting for many parents, as it’s not unusual for kids to give into tears or tantrums during the first one or two weeks before they adapt to the experience.

“It is a commitment,” says Schriver, of Meadowbrook. “It’s 10 minutes a day, five days a week. In the beginning, (Maren) was so little, it was hard to watch her put her head under the water ... but it’s comforting to know that she knows water safety and that if she were to fall in, this would buy her some time.”

Rosenthal acknowledges that Sasha wasn’t happy in the pool for at least the first three weeks of her lessons — and neither was she.

“I knew the success of the class meant preventing further tragedy, but I didn’t know how stressful it would be,” she says. “I hated it. It caused a lot of anxiety for me and the baby, but I still hold my ground that the anxiety that was prevented from that experience — the long-term benefits far outweigh the anxiety that I felt. And you can make the distinction of when your child’s

crying because they’re hurt or scared or there’s a serious problem versus just being in the pool and unhappy.”

While Gorman can understand parents’ discomfort, she also stresses that their support is essential to a child’s success in the program.

“The parents can exude a vibe to their kids of ‘This is OK,’ or ‘I’m nervous and anxious.’ The parents’ job is to encourage and guide them,” she says. “If parents are supportive and buy into the program, that gives a child security, the same way it might the first day of preschool.”

But for all the eventual comfort and assurance that ISR provides, it is in no way intended as an alternative for parental supervision and instinct.

“No child is drown-proof,” says Callaway. “The pool fences, the gates with the lock, Infant Swimming Resource — all of those are great layers of protection, but in reality, nothing can replace that active parental supervision.”

But, notes Gorman, “if somehow that breaks down — and it does — then this gives them a fighting chance.”

“This is about safety and survival and the bonus is, for those who do Swim-Float-Swim, these kids become great swimmers.”

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