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OP-ED

## *Diving in for a better Philadelphia*

I had an Army ROTC scholarship in college, and during my sophomore year, we went to Fort Bragg for training. As part of the regimen, we had to swim 10 laps in full uniform. Those whose swimming skills weren't up to par were referred to one side of the pool for a remedial program. Of the 100 of us, 30 were in that group. And since age 19, a vision has stuck in my mind: all the nonswimmers were African-American. There wasn't one white kid in the bunch.

We have an incredible opportunity to change that and much more for generations of disadvantaged youth in North Philadelphia through the construction of an Aquatic Education Center within The Salvation Army Ray and Joan Kroc Corps Community Center, planned for 4200 Wissahickon Ave. in Nicetown.

Under the leadership of Jim Ellis, youth mentor and subject of the Hollywood film "Pride," who has coached his PDR swimmers to national and international competitions, this world-class facility has the power to change the life path for countless families.

But don't take my word for it. The University of Georgia's Jack Bauerle, head coach of the 2008 Olympic Women's Swim Team, knows that more than 100 of Ellis' swimmers have earned college scholarships for their swimming accomplishments and 10 have competed at the U.S. Olympic swimming trials.

"With a first-class facility, the freedom to organize a strong, diverse swimming program and the wrap-around support of the range of time-tested educational and character-building Salvation Army programs, Jim will be able to help countless more youth and young adults realize the potential that lies within every one of them," Bauerle said.

Wanda Smith was one of these kids. Under Ellis' mentorship, she graduated 23rd in her high school class of 513 students. Ellis took her team to collegiate swim meets and showed them how to get there. Smith became an assistant coach to Ellis, and today has a master's degree and works in national banking in Washington, D.C.

Similarly, while his friends were getting involved with drugs and gangs, Warren Lambert was training for swim meets. "If it hadn't been for Jim encouraging me to go to college to continue swimming, I would be in a much different place today," said Lambert, now an executive at Merck & Co. and holder of an MBA in marketing and information systems from Penn State.

In the end, it's not about producing Olympic swimmers. This aquatic program, and the array of opportunities the Salvation Army Kroc Center offers will fuel kids' ambitions for the next 50-100 years. Now that's what I call making a splash.



GUEST  
COMMENT

Erik Kolar

## NEWSMAKERS



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