

SUMMER SAFETY NET

'Forced' into swimming lessons by his mom, teen now part of Town's lifeguarding crew

By Steve LeBlanc

CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

Thomas Curley can't hear a whistle blow without being thrust into high alert.

It's an occupational hazard he not only accepts, but embraces.

"I could be at the Leisure Centre and hear a whistle coming from the gym and I'll jump up," explained the 18-year-old Bishop Reding Secondary School graduate, one of roughly 100 lifeguards at Town of Milton pools — which are especially busy this time of year. "I think it'll (reaction to whistle) always be there. It's just built into me now."

Now in his fourth year of lifeguarding — spending most of his summer days at Rotary Park — Curley readily admits he wasn't the most enthusiastic student when it came to swimming lessons.

At least not early on.

"My mom forced me into it. She wanted me to at least pass Bronze Medallion and feel safe that I was a fantastic swimmer," he recalled. "I didn't really like it at first, but once the training went on and the life-saving aspects came in, like first aid and rescue breathing, I found it very interesting."

Along the way came inspiration from a relative's globe-trotting adventures.

"She (aunt or cousin Tanya) was a lifeguard who went all over the world working. We'd get photos from all these countries with her in different uniforms and be like, 'Wow!,'" said Curley, whose dad was a competitive swimmer and who had an ultra-short commute from Reding to the Milton Leisure Centre during the late stages of his lifeguard training.

With a summer as sweltering as this one, Curley noted that he and his fellow lifeguards are as vigilant in looking out for each other as they are for the swimmers in their charge.

"We're making do (in extreme heat). We make sure we're all staying hydrated and have a container of freezies," said the local teen,



Town of Milton lifeguard Thomas Curley on duty at the Rotary Park pool. The 18-year-old Bishop Reding Secondary School graduate says hats and sunglasses are part of the uniform. *Graham Paine / Metroland West Media Group* (Follow on Twitter @halton_photog)



who since becoming a lifeguard at 15 has played a supporting role in three rescues — taking on crowd control and communication with family members; tasks that suit his outgoing, take-charge nature. "If your water bottle's still full after a time you're going to be chugging it. If you don't get enough fluids out there you're going to get a throbbing headache."

"I burn easily, so I've got my SPF 60 out there. I think I've gone through three tubes already. And we've all got mandatory hats and sunglasses." When he's not on duty at Rotary Park or the Leisure Centre, Curley can be found running swimming lessons for the Town. While pre-schoolers make up his primary

student base, he's eager to share a reminder of how it's never too late to learn a new skill.

"Last year I had an 83-year-old man who couldn't swim, but wanted to learn because he was going on a vacation with his grandchild. He was really committed and a lot of fun. And my grandmother who's 77 only learned recently. She was so excited to call me up and tell me she did a back float."

"It's something everyone needs to learn. It's a life skill, not a hobby." Confident that his lifeguard training will serve him well in his still undetermined future career — one that'll hopefully involve working with the public — Curley said his job is more about prevention and problem-solving than rescues.

"It's about being aware of the ratio (of swimmers in pool), making sure kids don't wander off and asking questions when there's an issue (with kids arguing or fighting). Those efforts may not reap as much praise as a life-and-death scenario, but don't go completely unnoticed acknowledged either."

"It's not often, but some parents will come up and offer their thanks and say you handled that situation well," said Curley. "It's uplifting when you hear that and feel like you've done a good job."

