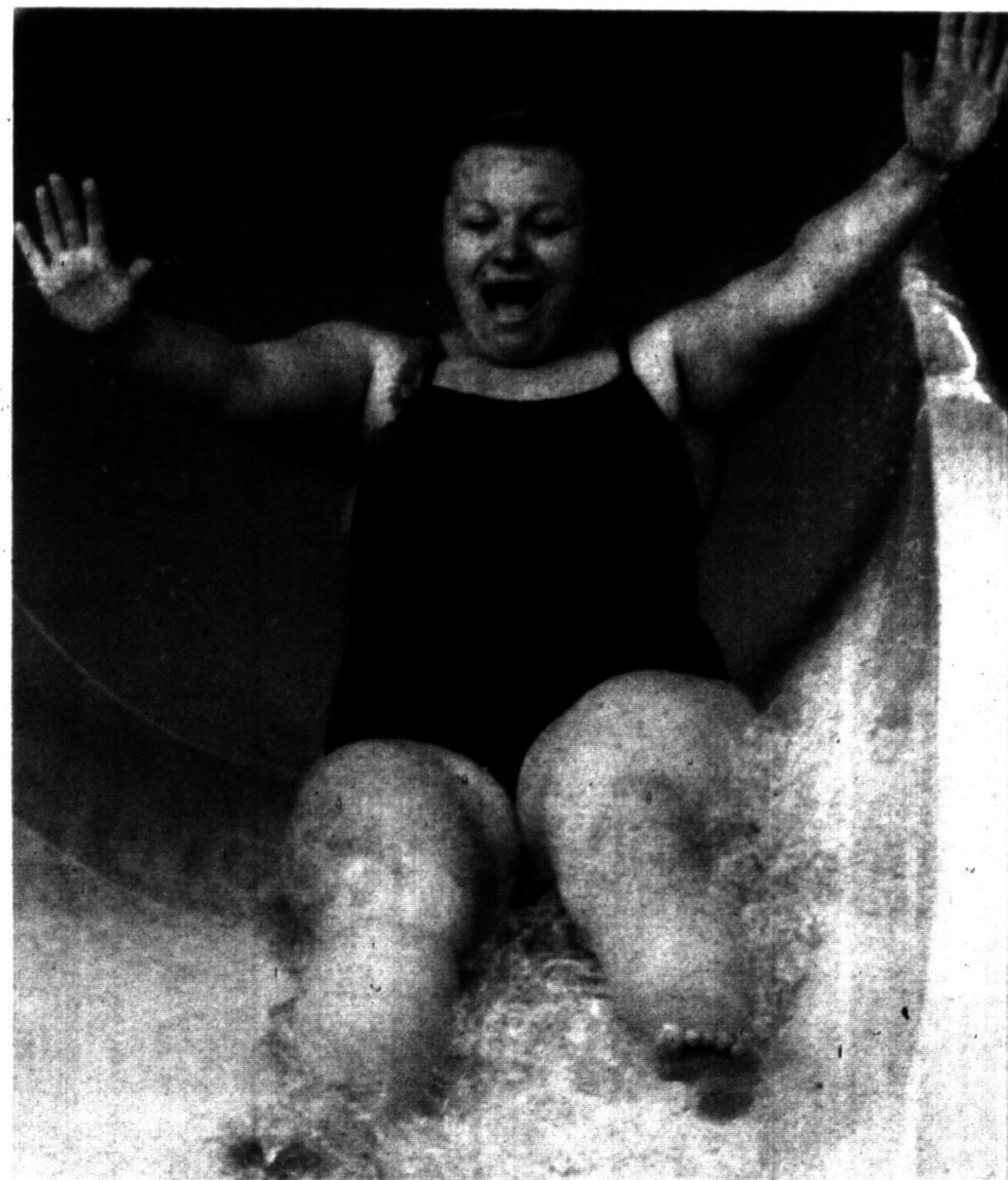


PUBLIC SAFETY



STAFF PHOTOS/NICK IWANYSHYN

Noah Robertson (above) and Marta Wrzal make their way towards the pool during a slide-a-thon, raising money for the Lifesaving Society's drowning prevention program at the Whitchurch-Stouffville Leisure Centre last Saturday. On the cover, Will Green comes off the slide.

Teens need water safety help, Lifesaving Society says

BY SANDRA BOLAN
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Parents are virtually 100-per cent confident about their teenagers' abilities to stay safe around water, yet almost 50 per cent of those same teens have never taken swimming lessons or if they did, it was more than five years ago, according to a recent poll commissioned by the Lifesaving Society.

"It's a false sense of confidence parents have that just because their child is older, they're fine," said Barbara Byers, public education director for the Lifesaving Society.

Ms Byers likened parents' attitude to a rite of passage. If they are old enough to go to the mall alone, then they're old enough to go swimming or boating with a friend.

"I think parents think the judgement or maturity they have is transferable. ... It's not that they don't care," Ms Byers said.

Two years ago July 19, Sabrina

Alibhai, 15, and her best friend Gift Diji, 16, drowned in Musselman's Lake.

"Two years later there's still families out there that are suffering and we don't have a true understanding of their grief. I hope they have found peace," said Councillor Phil Bannon, whose ward includes the lakeshore community.

Ms Alibhai, who was visiting her father Nash for the summer, and Ms Diji went out on the lake in a dingy, despite Mr. Alibhai's misgivings.

"They're going to do it because they can't help themselves sometimes. ... You can't say don't do it," Ms Byers said.

"Papa, I'm an excellent swimmer and I know how to swim. ... Don't worry Papa, don't worry. ..." were among the last words Ms Alibhai said to her father, as he recalled that fateful day in a 2011 interview with The Sun-Tribune.

Mr. Alibhai, without the girls' knowledge, checked on them. They

were fine. That was shortly before 8 p.m.

At 8:15 p.m., York Regional Police received a call regarding missing swimmers.

Witnesses said at the time, Ms Diji, a weak swimmer, went into the water. Ms Alibhai, who took swimming lessons, followed and tried to save her.

LAKE DEATHS HIT HOME

Of those parents recently polled by the Lifesaving Society, 28 per cent said they believed their teenager would jump into a pool to save a friend. That dropped to 20 per cent if it was in a lake.

Ms Alibhai and Ms Diji's deaths stuck with Ms Byers, who that same year worked with the coroner's office reviewing drownings. She realized kids need to be reached in their pre- to early teens with the message of water safety.

What came out of it was Swim to Survive+.

The program is for children in Grade 7 and builds upon the skills taught in the original Swim to Survive program for Grade 3 students, which taught them to roll into deep water, tread water for 60 seconds and swim 50 metres.

The new program teaches the pre-teens to roll, tread water and swim — with clothes on. It also teaches them how to help a friend who may have accidentally fallen into deep water through low-risk rescue skills — talk, throw and reach.

Changes have also been made at Musselman's Lake.

Last year, the Musselman's Lake Residents Association installed bright orange lake watch life rings in six different locations around the lake, which "can easily be seen and accessed in case of emergency," said Rick Wigmore, president of the organization, in an e-mail to The Sun-Tribune.

Mr. Bannon is also working on providing free CPR training to any

interested Whitchurch-Stouffville residents.

"It's nice to have in your back pocket in case it's ever required" in the water or on land, he said.

Over the past two years, the number of people taking swimming lessons at the Whitchurch-Stouffville Leisure Centre has increased, but so too has the town's population, noted Micole Ongman, manager of recreation for the town.

She also said it has become more of a family activity versus just the children.

"If you don't know how to swim, why send your kid off (to the pool or beach) because there's not a lot you can do for them," Ms Ongman said.

"It's not an accident, it can be prevented if you think about it ahead of time," she said.

The town hosted a slide-a-thon last weekend to raise money for the Lifesaving Society's drowning prevention program.

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