

# You Gotta Reach Out

By Brant Bass, San Diego Lifeguard Service

*Particularly in the larger Cities, we need to make efforts to stay in touch with the community. In San Diego, for instance, public education and outreach is an important component of a lifeguard's job. Certainly, a population aware of ocean hazards is less likely to need help. But the benefits go well beyond this. Through a number of programs, San Diego lifeguards learned some valuable lessons.*

## **Operation: Waterproof San Diego**

Born out of necessity, when budget times were tough, San Diego Lifeguards developed a program that had such a high profile that corporate sponsorship came forward to fund the majority of the program's expense. This included painting a small helicopter bright yellow and flying it from elementary school to elementary school with a specially designed water safety "show" that entertained and educated approximately 15,000 children each year. The 45-minute assembly is complete with music, song, and even a dance - the stingray shuffle, of course. This program focuses on the inner City and is usually provided free of charge.

## **Junior Lifeguard Program**

Many agencies offer a junior Lifeguard program. In San Diego, about 1,000 children participate in our program and about 20% of these children receive either full or partial scholarships. One of the primary recruiting tools is Operation Waterproof San Diego. This year an intern program began in which some of the older experienced junior lifeguards were paid to attend and assist in teaching the younger children. So far it's been a huge success.

## **Learn-to-Swim-For-Free**

The predominately white male workforce is commonplace in United States lifeguarding. In San Diego, however, we realized over the years the importance of having a diverse workforce that reflects the ethnicity of the community. Despite significant recruiting efforts, the San Diego lifeguard service hasn't come close to gaining the advantage of such diversity. In the mid-90's San Diego set out on a quest to understand why. As it turns out, statistics show that children who do not learn to swim by the age of 6 will probably not go on to become excellent swimmers. Since the Junior Lifeguard program accepts children 9-17, it was evident we needed to intervene earlier in the lives of children who would not normally have access to pools or swimming lessons. Some money was scraped together and flyers were handed out at a Martin Luther King Jr. parade offering free swim lesson at an inner city swimming pool. We expected that about 30-40 children would take advantage of the offer. Over 300 signed up. A scramble ensued to find the additional money to provide the lessons but ultimately, no one was turned away. A campaign also took place keep the inner city pools open year round and now they are.

## **Bridge- to-the-Beach**

While connecting to the inner city, lifeguards were astonished to learn how many children, just a few miles away, had never been to the beach. We made arrangements to borrow a bus from the fire department to haul a load out for a day of fun, just to expand their horizons. Now, lifeguards offer this to service to any inner city group or recreation center. For the price of a few hot dogs, we make some very valuable connections.

## **Media Relations**

In San Diego, a week doesn't go by without media coverage on some aspect of lifeguarding. This is by design. Twenty-four hours a day, the reporters can call a media line and speak with a live lifeguard. A lieutenant is assigned as the public information officer (PIO). Their success is partially based on whether or not they can get someone in a lifeguard uniform on the evening news. The PIO maintains relations with television and radio assignment editors so when a story breaks or we need publicity, one hand can wash the other.

## **The Benefits**

These programs may appear to take a great deal of effort and resources but the results have been nothing short of astonishing. The City of San Diego conducts customer surveys annually and since these programs have been in place the lifeguard service's rating has improved dramatically. And it's not because the lifeguards are preventing more drownings. It's because more of the City is aware of what lifeguards do. In fact, the satisfaction level has been one of the highest, almost identical to police and fire. If you think about, this is an amazing statistic considering a lifeguard's day-to-day contact is normally, solely with the beach community. Finally, San Diego Lifeguard Service still has the hope that the entire community will someday be represented in its workforce because everyone will have an equal opportunity to compete for a job.

**About the author:** *Brant Bass is a lieutenant with the San Diego Lifeguard Service and is their primary PIO. He a/so oversees the Junior Lifeguard Program. He has worked for the City of San Diego for 28 years.*