

Loaning a Jacket, Saving a Life

Sprigg works with community to spearhead life jacket loaner program

Here in Southwest Florida, we're surrounded by water — the Gulf, pools, canals and lakes. These watery wonderlands are picture-perfect destinations for family fun, but they also harbor serious danger for young children.

When a two-year-old drowned at Sugden Park during a family picnic in 2013, the community was devastated. To Kelly Sprigg, a former nurse and mother of two, a child's drowning tragically signals the need to take action. Together with her fellow board members at the NCH Safe & Healthy Children's Coalition, the U.S. Coast Guard and members of the community, Sprigg worked to develop a life jacket loaner program in Collier County.

"In Florida, there are so many ways we are in the water," says Sprigg. "As a nurse, I hate to hear about a drowning or a near-drowning that could have been prevented."

Paula DiGrigoli, executive director of NCH's Safe & Healthy Children's Coalition, agrees.

"Every time a drowning happens in the community, our coalition gets together and looks at what could have been done to prevent (it)," DiGrigoli adds.

Today, there are 15 life jacket loaner stations set up along Collier County beaches and waterways through the Safe & Healthy Children's Coalition of Collier County initiative called "Kids Don't Float — Give Them Something That Does." The program was put in place in 2013, based on a similar program launched in Alaska in 1997. The coalition also donates life jackets to community pools, including those at the Boys & Girls Club of Collier County and the Sun-N-Fun Lagoon water park.

Sprigg, who owns SYC Yachts with her husband Steve, was approached by the family's pediatrician, Todd Vedder, after the 2013 Sugden Park drowning. Dr. Vedder was chairman of the Safe & Healthy Children's Coalition at the time. Considering her nursing background and the couple's marine business, he tapped the Spriggs to launch a safety program. The Spriggs were quick to climb aboard and have been instrumental in raising funds to support the program.

The coalition also works closely with Collier County Parks and Recreation, who built the stands for the jackets; the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary flotillas 93, 95 and 96, who check the condition of the jackets; and the company, West Marine, which provides the logoed jackets at cost.

Sprigg says the program is running like a well-oiled machine.

"The auxiliary is our lifeline. They are the bloodline of the program, they are out there checking (on the life jackets) on a weekly basis."

Each stand holds 20 jackets, ranging in size from infant to adult extra-large. There are 20 backup jackets, too, used to replace those damaged or lost. The goal of the life jacket loaner program is to ensure safety for children and those most vulnerable in the population.

Tabatha Butcher, Collier County Emergency Medical Services' chief, said there have been more than 20 drownings or near-drownings in

Collier County every year for the past three years.

"It only takes seconds for a child to get out of sight and end up in the water," Butcher said. "I believe the life jacket loaner

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program is a very important resource for our community."

Aside from the loaner program, the coalition works to educate the community on safe practices around water, urging parents to keep their children in sight at all times, install alarms on doors that lead outside and fences around pools. Butcher also recommends preemptive measures — swimming

lessons for kids and CPR education for the public at large.

"When a bystander witnesses an event and can act by providing CPR prior to first responders' arrival, it increases the chances of survival and decreases long-term effects on the patient," Butcher said.

Sprigg and her teammates continue their work to make the water safer for

all children — including Sprigg's own children, Zane, 7, and Ruby, 3 (who is still learning to swim). Sprigg is relieved to see that Zane and Ruby aren't the only children sporting "Kids Don't Float" jackets at the beach.

"We see people using them all the time. It's fantastic," Sprigg said. "I would love to see more communities adopt this program." ❁



Kelly Sprigg was instrumental in starting the "Kids Don't Float — Give Them Something That Does" life-jacket loaner program.

Tips for Swimming Safely
NCH's Safe & Healthy Children Coalition offers these tips for water safety:

- ❁ Install fences around your pool or hot tub, with a gate that closes and latches by itself.
- ❁ Install alarms on all doors and windows that lead outside.
- ❁ Remove ladders from above ground pools after each use, and keep chairs away from the pool to prevent children climbing in.
- ❁ Avoid blow-up rings and armbands and opt for a "puddle jumper" vest.
- ❁ Empty or drain bathtubs when bath time is over, and never leave your child unattended in the bath.
- ❁ If your child is missing, check nearby pools and other water areas first. It only takes seconds for a child to drown.