



CHARITY SPOTLIGHT:

Splash Foundation

With the belief that everyone should be able to move through water with confidence, local charity Splash Foundation has taught more than 1,200 people - from domestic helpers to underprivileged children - how to swim. With an ambitious goal to teach swimming to 5,000 individuals by 2020, we speak to co-founder **Libby Alexander** to learn more about their mission.

Why did you set up Splash Foundation?

Splash was set up by a small group of swimmers with the very simple objective of teaching under-resourced communities - migrant domestic workers, refugees and local kids - how to swim. What we didn't anticipate was how quickly Splash would become about so much more than just swimming. Our story now is more than learning a life-skill; it's how that skill empowers and connects people.

What does the programme involve?

We run a free 12-week learn to swim programme designed for absolute beginners. Most of the classes take place on a Sunday at various international schools, but we are also expanding into Saturday lessons as well as employer-sponsored lessons during the week. The emphasis is on water safety - jumping in,

submerging, survival backstroke - and the introduction of basic freestyle. By the end of the course, about 80 percent of our participants can swim 25 metres unaided. Splash also teaches local kids aged 8-16 from low-income communities. We work with other NGOs and schools in under-resourced communities to deliver free swim lessons.

With so many public pools and beaches in Hong Kong, why are there so many non-swimmers?

During one of our youth classes, I asked the 10- and 12-year-olds if they had ever been in a swimming pool or in the sea. Not one said yes. That was heartbreaking - especially living on an island with amazing and affordable public pools! Many of us can't imagine a childhood without swimming.

In developing countries like the Philippines and Indonesia, swimming is not part of the school curriculum. Even here in Hong Kong, not all schools have the resources to offer swimming. And if it's not offered through schools? Let's be honest - anyone who has kids knows swim lessons are expensive. It's a very technical skill and requires a low student-to-coach ratio to be done safely and effectively.

So many of our Splashers have simply never had the opportunity. If you miss the window of learning as a 4, 5 or 6-year-old, your chances of ever learning to swim are very slim. That is why we focus on slightly older kids as well as migrant workers. It is a critical life skill and everyone should have the chance to learn regardless of their socio-economic background.

What kind of feedback do you get from people after they complete a course?

They LOVE it! This is one hour per week where they can step out of their role as a domestic helper and do something for their own development and enjoyment. So many tell us how their confidence and self-esteem has improved. We have a strict attendance policy and maintain a 94 percent graduation rate which speaks volumes. Our Splashers realize this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and they take it seriously.



Do you have any particularly memorable cases?

So many - everyone has a special story! We offer some intermediate and advanced classes, and many Splashers are now quite accomplished swimmers. One of our first graduates swam a 4K open water race in her hometown a year after she learned to swim. Many have joined the open water swim community here in Hong Kong, swimming every Sunday.

However, it is our impact out of the water that really makes a difference. One Splasher texted me after graduating to tell me how Splash had changed her life. She was depressed and would stay in her room every Sunday as she didn't like crowds and had nowhere to go. After discovering Splash, she said she met new friends and now had a focal point to her week.

What kind of support do you need to keep Splash running?

We need more volunteer coaches and more funding! We have received wonderful support from the Fu Tak Lam Foundation, which funds most of our programme costs. More and more international schools and private clubs are opening their doors so we can use their pools during off-peak times. But our programmes are in such demand and we could be doing so much more. While Splash has been nearly 100 percent volunteer-run for three years, our biggest setback is operational funding.

We need to invest in some staff to make Splash sustainable. We now run six-10 weekly classes, across four to five locations, with over 300 swimmers and 70 active volunteer coaches every term. And that's just our migrant worker programme! We simply can't manage this volume on a volunteer basis.

How can Liv readers get involved?

Pay it forward! If you were fortunate enough to have swim lessons once upon a time, why not make the investment for others? On average, it costs us about \$2,000 to teach someone to swim and be water safe. You could also become a volunteer coach! You don't need to be Michael Phelps; as long as you can swim a couple laps and understand the basics, Splash can train you. Third, Bring Splash to your private club or apartment building. Hong Kong is filled with under-utilized pools and Splash could be running classes during off-peak hours.

Finally, get your kids involved in fundraising or awareness-building. Recently at a public event, a 12-year-old boy came over to our booth by himself and put some money in our donation jar. He quietly told me "You taught my Auntie how to swim and I think that's pretty cool". Even kids understand the power of swimming.

Learn more at www.splashfoundation.org.

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