

# SOAP and Water: Instructor Helps

By Martin Wilbur

Jeff Krieger has spent most of his adult life either in the water or helping people overcome their fears. As an avid swimmer, aquatics instructor and a mental health counselor specializing in stress and phobia management, he can usually recognize if someone doesn't know how to swim or has a deep-seated fear of the water.

"If you have an adult who's never learned to swim, there's a really solid chance it's more than just never having the resources available to them to learn how to swim," Krieger said. "There's probably some kind of fear working on them. You can't learn to swim until you learn how to overcome your fear."

In 2000, Krieger combined his two areas of expertise to create Strategies for Overcoming Aquatic Phobias (SOAP), a program that works with people, either individually or in small groups, to tackle their fear of the water. Even in the mental health field, there has been little research on the topic, Krieger said.

Today, he holds his classes in one of three venues: locally, at the Saw Mill Club in Mount Kisco, as well as at Mark Twain Middle School in Yonkers and at the 92nd Street Y in Manhattan.

The program has become so popular that for the first time last Saturday, Krieger held an instructor training program at the Saw Mill Club. The aquatics staff, once



Aquatics instructor Jeff Krieger is at his students' side in the pool, helping them to overcome their fear of water.

trained, will be able to take some of the increasing workload off his hands.

Generally, those suffering from aquaphobia are uncomfortable in water, even in the shallow end, or are unable to put their face in the water, including

bathing in the most extreme cases. Many others can't get their feet off the bottom of the pool, Krieger said.

To overcome those fears is anything but easy. Each course typically lasts eight to 12 weeks and much is expected of

the student. Krieger gradually exposes them to the pool, has them float on their back, put their face in water, teaches them breathing techniques and gradually has them venture into the deep end underwater with him by their side. He

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# Clients Overcome Fears in the Pool

said with a commitment from the student he has a 90 percent success rate, which means reaching a comfort level in a pool but not open-water swimming.

"I ask them, are you able to commit to six to eight weeks, an hour each week?" said Krieger, 58, a Beacon resident. "If you have a conflict in your schedule, let's wait until you can really focus, because it takes a lot out of you. They go home wiped out, exhausted. They feel great but it takes a lot of energy, a lot of effort, to see it through."

Krieger's students range from children to 81 years old, with the average age in the 50s. He said many of his clients are older because they finally have the time to tackle a challenge that has gnawed at them for decades. Some have even hidden their phobia from spouses and close friends for years, finding excuses to avoid pools, beaches or water at any cost. If they are parents, they run a danger of passing their fears onto their children, he said.

"It seems like they get to a point in their life where they're going through a career change, nearing retirement, they may have grandchildren or [are] just plain sick and tired of carrying that monkey on their back, and they get this," Krieger said.

"I feel badly for them they weren't able to deal with it and be successful with it earlier in their life," he added.

But that's okay for those who may have



Jeff Krieger conducts a peer counseling session to help people with aquatic phobias..

spent years afraid but can now enjoy the benefits of swimming. Ellen Bittner, 54, a retired teacher from Eastchester, avoided the water most of her life. In 2003, she took Krieger's class because she had gained weight and wanted an enjoyable and less painful method of exercise. She said the transformation was exhilarating.

"I was tired of being afraid," Bittner said. "I wanted to do aquatic exercises. I hadn't done any exercise and I wanted to lose weight, and I thought this would be a

big benefit."

There is often no single traumatic experience for aquaphobics that sets off their fears. Armonk resident Jane Cahn, who also completed the course in 2003 when she was 66, said she had tried to learn how to swim at various times in her life but ended up avoiding the water. Cahn said Krieger's understanding, support and building of trust quickly put her at ease.

"As we experienced one success after another, our confidence grew. By the last

of the eight sessions, we were all wishing for more," Cahn said.

Jean Zambrano, 41, who currently ventures from Rockland County each week to take Krieger's class, said she has been battling her fears since childhood when she nearly drowned, and as a parent she doesn't want to pass along her problem to her children.

Saw Mill Club Aquatics Director Tammy Neubauer said she has seen firsthand how Krieger takes people who come in scared of leaving the side of the pool and—in most cases—leave the program confident in their ability to handle the water.

"I think a lot of kids have phobias, a lot of adults have phobias, and as far as I'm concerned Jeff has really dealt with that population tremendously," Neubauer said.

Krieger said parents should keep an eye on their children because there's no reason why everyone shouldn't benefit from swimming.

"I promise every client, if they give me 6 to 12 hours, I promise I will change their life," Krieger said. "There aren't too many people who I disappoint. I wouldn't make that kind of statement unless I had a track record to back it up."

To learn more about SOAP, visit [www.waterphobias.com](http://www.waterphobias.com), contact Krieger at 727-741-3088 or e-mail him at [jeffkrieger@waterphobias.com](mailto:jeffkrieger@waterphobias.com).



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