

Christina Theiss - SWG Owner/Coach

Four-year-old, Christina Gillin Theiss pulled on a blue swim cap and eagerly jumped into the pool. It was her first swim class.

Now, 37 years later, she wears a blue brimmed cap with the logo "Swim With Gills". It's the name of the swim school she opened in 2010. She looks down at the quizzical face in the water below her, gives the broad smile that's her trademark, and says "you'll do great, just wait and see". Her mother nods in agreement, adding "she's the best around".

The years between now and then were filled with challenges Christina never anticipated, rewards she never expected, including the coveted National American Red Cross Merit Lifesaving Award.

Her swimming career was launched when she transferred to Germantown Academy in Fort Washington, PA on a swimming scholarship. This gained her a spot on the school's United States Swimming Team headed by reknown Olympic Coach Dick Shoulberg. He was tough, held impossibly rigid practices, and demanded the best she could give - every day.

While at GA, a water polo accident injured her shoulder, but not her spirit. She swam shorter distance events and became a Junior Olympian receiving her highest rankings in the backstroke and short medley relay.

As a Germantown Academy Athlete -Scholar and listed on the National Student-Scholar Honor Roll she was awarded a track and swim scholarship to Duquesne University in Pittsburgh and a place on the Division One, A-10 classified team.

The summer before relocating there, she lived in Ocean City, NJ., joined its local swim team, successfully competed in long distant ocean water competitions and joined the Beach Patrol.

Unfortunately, she seriously reinsured her shoulder in a freak accident, and underwent surgery and physical therapy to regain her strength.

In college, she studied psychology, taught swimming to underprivileged children and joined the Track and Field team, specializing in Hurdles. Although she swam and practiced with the swim team, she accepted the fact that her competitive days were over.

In her senior year she qualified for a student exchange program in Australia. While there she became almost obsessed with photography. Capturing the alluring natural beauty of its many traditions and islands, she found herself one with the camera.

When she returned to the states, she was accepted into the Newhouse School's Photography Master's Program at Syracuse University, NY. studies in art therapy for children and photo journalism took her to Australia for her final school year.

She moved to Florida, hoping to begin a photography career. However, at that time, newspapers weren't hiring those experienced in digital photography. And manipulating photos wasn't her forte. She preferred capturing real life as she saw it.

Back at the beach, she continued on the Beach Patrol, swimming competitive open water races and on the weekends displayed her photography juried art shows up and down the coast. She received accolades on both fronts.

Summer only lasts so long. It was time to plan her future. Teaching children to swim HAD always been her passion. And it was time to pursue it.

Throughout her career she had multiple teachers, ranging from high school gym teachers to Olympic coaches, each with different personalities and program approaches. She remembered pieces that each she applied as Aquatic Director for a private Palm Beach swim club. She taught their instructors the positive components of the Learn-to-Swim program that had worked so well for her. The results were applauded by the swimmers and their parents.

After two years, she knew it was time to move onto her goal of opening a swim school. Working as an American Red Cross Authorized Provider, she was certified as Water Safety Instructor Trainer, American Association of Physical Activity and Recreation Instructor and Credentialed as an Adaptive Aquatic course instructor and Lifeguard Instructor Trainer.

Encouragement and support from those around her, gave her the final push. And Swim With Gills, came to life with the Mission to Change and Save Lives one Child at a time! It expanded from teaching at a Palm Beach Gardens preschools during the week, to adding weekends programs and traveling to homes and community pools for classes. Recently she expanded to LA Fitness, where lessons can be taught year 'round throughout the week in a heated pool. Training Lifeguard in the community, Private Lifeguarding Services were added to the program to fully encompass her mission!

"Teaching children to swim involves much more than following a skills check list. It involves relating to the swimmers on their level ... being able to sense their comfort level on any given day....and responding, not reacting, to it."

Christina credits Jim Hagen's support, who certified and credentialed her as a WSI Instructor Trainer, for giving her the "final push" to start Swim With Gills.

"By being able to certify instructors, I can select those whom I feel are a best 'fit' to teach for my swim school."

Christina knows the components needed to teach children and adults. Swimming since the age of four, she is an accomplished competitive swimmer who swam on United States Swimming Association teams since first grade.

A nationally recognized athlete-scholar while attending both Germantown Academy in Pennsylvania, and Duquesne University (an A-1 classified team), in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Christina has been teaching swimming since the age of 18.

Throughout her career, she had a multitude of coaches, each of whom with different approaches to teaching. "The positive approaches worked," she recalls, "others, well, were based on the idea that "negativity" would make you work harder--and that had the opposite affect."

Before starting Swim With Gills, she was aquatic director of a private swim club for several years where she directed a large staff and taught private lessons. During this experience, she developed and refined her idea for a creative, non-aggressive swim school.

Christina believes that everyone can swim, regardless of limitations and backs this up with her certification as an American Association of Physical Activity and Recreation instructor, and credentials as an Adaptive Aquatic course instructor.