

Column from Wayne's World from the Upson Beacon Newspaper

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Swimming Lessons: A Life-Saving Education We Can't Ignore

The statistics are stark: drowning is the leading cause of accidental death in children under 4, with one in four children's deaths attributed to this preventable tragedy. Behind these numbers lies a story that hit close to home – the heartbreaking loss of two-year-old Gavin Reid Hansrote on May 10, 2024, during what should have been a joyful family pizza night.

As an 82-year-old swimmer often mistaken for someone half my age, I've experienced firsthand the life-preserving power of swimming. Twice in my life, this skill saved me from drowning. When I recently joined a group of men discussing aging – all between 65 and 70 – they were stunned to learn my true age, assuming I was around fifty. My secret? Daily water aerobics – truly the fountain of youth.

But this column isn't about longevity – it's about survival.

Gavin's parents, Abbie and Patrick Hansrote have transformed their unimaginable loss into a mission of hope. In the past year, Abbie has become a certified swim instructor, and they have donated AEDs to the Upson County Sheriff's Office, and contributed \$1,000 for swim lessons at their local daycare. Their tragedy has become a catalyst for change in Thomaston, providing families with swim lessons, water safety courses, and critical support for those affected by drowning-related incidents.

The harsh reality is that these tragedies continue despite being preventable. While we mandate various subjects in our schools, we overlook this literal life-saving skill. Look at countries like Sweden and the Netherlands, where mandatory swimming education in primary schools has led to significantly lower drowning rates. This isn't coincidence – it's causation.

Critics often cite costs and logistics as barriers. Yes, universal swim education requires investment in infrastructure and training. But consider this: drowning costs the United States approximately \$1.3 billion annually in direct and indirect costs, according to the CDC. More importantly, how do we put a price tag on a child's life?

Some argue that swimming education is a parental responsibility. But this oversimplifies a complex issue. Many parents can't swim themselves, lack access to facilities, or face financial constraints. Should a child's survival skill be determined by their circumstances?

Swimming education offers benefits beyond drowning prevention:

- Enhanced physical health and cognitive development

- Improved discipline and confidence
- Access to recreational activities
- Generational impact as swimmers teach their own children

The solution isn't complicated – universal swimming lessons and water safety education. The challenge lies in implementation. In a county as resourceful as ours, the question isn't whether we can afford to teach all children to swim, but rather: how can we afford not to?

As Water Safety Month approaches this May, let's honor Gavin's memory by taking action. Contact your school board, city council, and state representatives. Support local initiatives providing swimming lessons. Share water safety information with your neighbors. Attend the Reidy to Swim 5K at The Greatest Generation Park on May 10, 2025 being held to raise awareness and funds to support water safety.

Because every child deserves the chance to learn this life-saving skill. Every child deserves to live.

The Zoe Pediatric Foundation has wholeheartedly joined in this effort. If you are inclined to help, please contact Ms. Kelly Turner at 706-442-9356 or ZoeFoundation@zoepeds.com. Abbie or Patrick Hansrote can be contacted at Reidytoswim@yahoo.com.