

Ethan nearly drowned at a Tucson summer camp, now his mom wants to talk to you

Alexis Huicochea Aug 18, 2016



Courtesy of Rose Bennett

Ethan Bennett, 13, continues to enjoy the water seven years after a near-drowning profoundly changed his life.

Rose Bennett remembers June 2, 2009, like it was yesterday.

The Tucson mother dropped off her 6-year-old son at a summer day camp before heading into work at University Medical Center. She had no idea that the next time she would see Ethan would be as he was wheeled into the emergency room where she watched as medical personnel tried to resuscitate him.

It was then that Bennett learned that Ethan had been found at the bottom of a 8-foot-deep pool by a friend.

None of the people who were put in charge were CPR certified and no one knows how long Ethan was under water, although it was speculated that he could have been missing for 15 minutes.

“He spent nearly seven months in the hospital and when we came it out, it was a whole new world,” Bennett said.

She, her family and friends all had to adjust to their new normal: a wheelchair-bound child who could no longer speak.

He is nourished and kept alive by a tube that pumps formula into his stomach.

“Near drownings are not like what happens in movies — the person doesn’t just cough up water and then they’re fine and they go about their business for the rest of their lives,” Bennett said. “Any amount of time you go without oxygen to your brain, there’s going to be damage.”

In the years that followed, Bennett was asked to share her experience with community groups and at water safety events, but the audience was always the same: public officials, first responders and people from the medical field who were well aware of the impacts of near drownings.

“It occurred to me, if I was going to talk to me as a parent, before Ethan got hurt, how would I talk to me?” Bennett said. “People were advocating for water safety before then but I didn’t know about it. People were giving away swim classes for free and I had no idea.”

That was when the concept of a Water Safety Expo was born and on Aug. 27, it will be held for the fifth year in a row.

The event, sponsored by the Drowning Prevention Coalition of Arizona, features information booths, live demonstrations, activities and freebies and is held at a monster truck drag race — a place where families with young children are regularly found, Bennett said.

Water Safety Expo

While Ethan’s story may be terrifying, that’s not the message Bennett wants to convey. With the help of water therapy, even Ethan enjoys time in the water again.

“I tell people, ‘water is a lot of fun. Our bodies are mostly water, we bathe in water, we drink water, we play in water, we swim,’” Bennett said. “Water is not a bad thing as long as we’re smart and safe about it because literally in one second your whole life will change.

“I think, what if one person was watching him like they were supposed to? What if one person was CPR certified? I would rather eliminate those factors and see people be 100 percent safe

and have 100 percent fun. I would love it if another family never has to know what we go through because it's 100 percent preventable."

The timing of the Water Safety Expo coincides with Drowning Impact Awareness Month, which is observed every August when a spike is regularly seen in water-related incidents, said Jessica Mitchell, Safe Kids Pima County Coordinator.



Sisters Aubree, right, 6, and Alena Lawless, 9, play in the water at Clements Center, 8155 E. Poinciana Drive, on the first day of the swimming season at Tucson Parks and Recreation pools Thursday, May 29, 2014, in Tucson, Ariz.

Mike Christy / Arizona Daily Star

August is a particularly high-risk time for child drowning because of triple-digit heat and back-to-school distractions, Mitchell said.

A lot of work has been done to get the word out to the community about water safety with an emphasis on young children and it appears to be paying off.

In 2015, 10 water-related incidents were recorded in Pima County, a decline of more than 58 percent from just two years earlier. So far this year, eight incidents have been reported.

One Tucson pediatrician, Dr. Duane Dyson, regularly "prescribes" swim lessons to his youngest patients at their 1-year-old checkups.

That approach, which was rolled out in Maricopa County in 2011 and 2012, resulted in a 50 percent decline in child drownings within the first year.

“We found out when your pediatrician tells you to do something, you’re probably going to listen to them more so than if you’re at a health fair,” said Mitchell, adding that Safe Kids Pima County is working to get more doctors on board for the program.

The response at Dyson Pediatrics, 4530 E Camp Lowell Dr., has been positive, Dr. Dyson said.

“Arizona being a state where people do a lot of swimming, every year there are going to be drownings or near-drownings, so I figure the more kids that are prepared on how to survive if they fall in the water, the better,” he said. “Parents seem to appreciate that I bring it up and it has been well received.”

Where the focus needs to be enhanced is for teens and adults, who are becoming victims of water-related incidents more often, Mitchell said.

While it’s unclear why that is, Safe Kids Pima County says it will continue to spread the message of the ABCs of water safety:

A: Adult supervision at all times. Children should also be trained on what to look for and how to alert an adult in an emergency.

B: Barriers installed and maintained

C: Classes — both swimming and CPR. Drexel Heights offers [CPR classes](#) for \$15 for residents of the fire district. Desert Fire CPR & First Aid offers [classes](#) for \$25.