

ARTICLE (FOR PRC)

Swimmers gain confidence, and new skills at the W.A.D.E event held at PRC



[Caption: USA Swimming coach Dr. Ayanna Rakhu assists participants to overcome their fear of floating and experience buoyancy in the pool at the first ever W.A.D.E. event held at the PRC this March.]

“Did you know that you can breathe underwater?” Dr. Ayanna Rakhu, Founder of Sankofa Swim International, asked a group of women inside the pool at the [Pallottine Renewal Center](#) (PRC) this past March. Most of the women had never learned to swim and smiled in disbelief. A USA Swimming coach from St. Louis, Dr. Rakhu suddenly submerged her head underwater and blew bubbles out of her nose. When she came up for air, the women beamed with confidence — their collective “ah-ah” rippling across the pool.

For Dr. Rakhu, it was no coincidence that all the women gathered were of African descent. After interviewing dozens of Black people about their relationship with water for her Ph.D., Dr. Rakhu saw an urgent need for swim training in the Black community that was anxiety sensitive, and culture- and trauma-informed. “Not knowing how to swim has cost us lives and an opportunity to be healed by the water,” she said. “That is why our approach incorporates positive reinforcement, free play, and social and emotional support.” To help more African Americans become confident swimmers, Dr. Rakhu started the Sankofa Swim International consultancy and W.A.D.E, an interactive in-pool experience aimed at increasing confidence and skills in the water.

Her first W.A.D.E. experience in St. Louis was sponsored by the [Swim On Foundation](#) and took place at the PRC March 3 - 4. Over the course of two days, Dr. Rakhu and co-instructors Serilla Flanigan (of St. Louis, Mo.) and Hope Lockett, (of St. Paul, Mn.), helped 20 participants — from afraid-of-water, to beginner and advanced — increase their skills in the pool. Reflecting on her time at W.A.D.E STL, Tamika Evans said, “I’m 55 but I never got in the water because I was afraid to put my head underwater. With the help of the instructors, I was able to learn how to breathe, put my head underwater, and blow bubbles. For me, that is like getting a diploma. Actually, it’s like graduating from college. I am extremely excited about what I learned today.”

Dr. Rakhu looks forward to reaching more aspiring swimmers in the future, and said she appreciates the warm and welcoming accommodations PRC provided. "With its hospitable staff, and heated, multi-level pool with private changing areas and showers, PRC provided the ideal amenities needed to make our first St. Louis W.A.D.E. event a success," said Dr. Rakhu.

— *Story By Malena Amusa*

HIGHLIGHT VERSION (FOR PRC)

Swimmers gain confidence, new skills at the W.A.D.E event held at PRC

More than 20 swimmers gained new confidence and skills March 3rd-5th at the first ever W.A.D.E. STL, an interactive in-pool experience created by Dr. Ayanna Rakhu, Founder of Sankofa Swim International, and hosted at the [Pallottine Renewal Center](#) (PRC) with the generous support of the [Swim On Foundation](#). The event catered specifically to African American swimmers of varying skill levels to help fill the need for anxiety sensitive, and culture- and trauma-informed swim training. Dr. Rakhu, a USA Swimming coach from St. Louis, Mo., started W.A.D.E. (Water Activities in Diverse Environments) after completing her dissertation that examined the numerous barriers resulting in only 64% of African Americans learning to swim compared to 85% of their White counterparts. "Our goal is to help participants reclaim their place as masters of the water by creating swim programs that prepare individuals to be confident in the water and navigate a variety of aquatic situations," said Dr. Rakhu who was also joined by co-instructors Serilla Flanigan (of St. Louis, Mo.) and Hope Lockett (of St. Paul, Mn.). "We are grateful for PRC and the Swim On Foundation for helping to make this event a big success."