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Former city lifeguards make a splash

Tribute honors those who worked at segregated pools in 1940s, 1950s

By Madison Park

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Children splashed each other in the pool, squealing and giggling. Sunglasses-clad lifeguards perched on a high chair, watching for signs of trouble. Parents coaxed the little ones who eyed the water with apprehension.

It was a familiar scene for Clarence "Shad" Brown Jr., 75, who worked as a city lifeguard in the 1950s - except for one major difference.

"We couldn't go to this pool," Brown said, sitting by the Druid Hill Park pool yesterday. "We had to go to the colored pool."

The Druid Hill Park Negro Pool was smaller, and when it rained, water from a nearby cemetery flowed into it, Brown said. That pool closed in 1955, and it has now been filled and sodded.

As 19 city pools opened yesterday for the summer, Baltimore officials recognized Brown and his fellow lifeguards who worked at the segregated pools in the 1940s and 1950s.

"When the temperature was in the high 90s, for African-American children, their only relief was the Druid Hill Negro Pool," said Tom Stosur, assistant deputy mayor. "Some of the lifeguards who worked here from 1921 to 1955 faced the hardships and reality of racism, but they also created a bond that lasted a lifetime."

It was like a class reunion for the old overseers of the segregated pool, who reminisced about their teenage adventures as they looked at photographs. Recalling their summer memories, they talked of pranks, such as pushing girls who had just dried off back into the pool and diving off an adjacent rooftop into the water.

"It was prestigious to be a lifeguard," Brown said. "You got to the pool for free." Admission was 10 cents for children and 35 cents for adults. And there was an additional perk, Brown said: "You got to see the girls."

Robert Ammons, a 78-year-old former lifeguard, clapped his hands and burst into laughter. "That was the main thing," he said.

When integration came, the transition in the city pools was not smooth, said Douglas Bishop, 77, who worked as a lifeguard for four summers in the 1950s.

"The park was divided," he said, shaking his head. "Education, occupations, it was all divided. The city was divided in half. Things are different now."

When Bishop came to work as a lifeguard at the newly integrated Patterson Park pool, some would say to him, "Why are you on that chair? You can't swim."

"Patterson Park didn't welcome us at first," he said. "I think the people realized the law was the law. People were reluctant to accept it. They later realized lifeguards were serious individuals who wanted to save the lives of children."

Some people stopped coming to the pool.

"That's life," Bishop said. "A lot of people left. It's the same with the housing situation. Black people move into the neighborhood, white people leave."

After leaving their summer jobs, many of the lifeguards went to college - at schools such as Morgan State University, Howard University and Tennessee State University - on swimming scholarships and pursued careers as dentists, pilots, physicians and professors.

Yesterday, the former lifeguards received the T-shirts, whistles and swimming shorts that current city lifeguards wear, and were given medals that read "Rescuer for the Druid Hill Negro Pool."

About 100 children and their families, antsy to jump into the water, gathered at the pool yesterday, and many had not noticed the ceremony honoring the lifeguards.

Over the years, coming to the Druid Hill Park pool has become a summertime ritual. Elliott Thompson, who has swum at community pools for 20 years, brought his 3-year-old son yesterday. "Everyone from any neighborhood across the city can come here to Druid Hill," he said. "I used to do it as a kid."

It was the first time Shireen Robinson had come to the pool. She brought her 9-year-old daughter, her nephews and nieces, and their friends because it's an affordable way to entertain the kids, she said. "With gas prices, I can't drive to any beach," she said. "This is a 15-minute drive. We're staying close to home."

The children dropped coins - three pennies and a rusty dime they picked up from the bottom of the pool - by her feet. "They're diving for gas money," she joked.

By noon, after the officials had made their remarks and honored the five lifeguards, they counted down, and the children lunged into the pool.

Brown did not go into the water. He smiled as the children wading in the pool shrieked with delight. "It makes me feel good for them, because we came a long way," he said.

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