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Everyone In the Pool!

For 8-year-olds Jeremy Garcia and Daphne Salgado, the best part was jumping off the diving board. That's quite a leap for a couple of third-graders who just a few weeks earlier weren't sure they wanted to get in the pool at all.

Now they can tread water, float on their backs and swim 25 yards. And they have certificates to prove it.

Garcia and Salgado are among 32 third-graders from Santa Barbara's Franklin Elementary School and Adelante Charter School who recently completed a series of nine free swim lessons at UC Santa Barbara's aquatics complex. The lessons are part of the 3rd Grade Swim to College Program (3GSCP) sponsored by the [Early Academic Outreach Program](#) (EAOP). Taught by a group of undergraduates — all certified water safety instructors — and student volunteers from Dos Pueblos High School, the lessons took place over three weeks in January and February.

The next round of third-graders, from McKinley Elementary School and the Santa Barbara Community Academy, will make a splash in April.

"The idea is to enhance water safety," said Britt Ortiz, EAOP director and one of the co-founders of the program. "The other is to teach lifelong skills — how to be healthy, how to engage with water, not just in swimming pools but in the ocean and in lakes and rivers."

The lessons are provided in conjunction with the Santa Barbara School District's A-OK (After School Opportunities for Kids) Program. Following a pilot program with one

school last spring, 3GSCP expanded its reach to include all six Santa Barbara elementary schools that host A-OK after-school programs. “A-OK’s grant is around academics, nutrition and physical fitness, so when we pitched the idea to the coordinators, they loved it,” said Ortiz. “Now we’re working with kids who qualify for free or reduced-cost meal programs and who are the least likely to have access to swim lessons.”

The program’s co-sponsor, the South Coast Community Aquatics Center, donates swimsuits, swimcaps, goggles and mesh equipment bags, all of which the students are allowed to keep when the lessons are finished.

As thrilling an experience as the lessons are for the third-graders, they are equally rewarding for the student instructors. “Most of the kids started out afraid to get in the water and afraid to get in the deep water,” said Abby Batcheller, a communication major who completed her first session as an instructor with the program. “And now they’re going off the diving boards and they love being in the water.”

“For me, the best experiences are the kids who come in terrified of getting in the water and then getting them to realize they’re having such fun while being safe,” said Micaela Baker, an English major and a 3GSCP veteran instructor. “They can now know they don’t have to be afraid of a body of water.”

The swim program also offers the third-graders an opportunity to learn about aquatics-based areas of study, such as marine biology, oceanography and ocean engineering, and therein lies the academic component of 3GSCP. “A student who doesn’t know how to swim would be less likely to engage in those fields,” said Ortiz.

At the end of February, the students returned to UC Santa Barbara for a campus tour that included stops at the Library, the music building, the MultiCultural Center and the University Center (for lunch at Subway). At Santa Rosa residence hall, a student panel of EAOP interns shared various aspects of university life (no one tells you to clean your room and you can set your own bedtime) while small groups of third-graders took turns viewing a model dorm room.

A visit to the [REEF \(Research Experience & Education Facility\)](#) at the Marine Science Institute (MSI) rounded out the tour, allowing the students to get up close and personal with marine life in the touch tanks. “They’re able to make the connection between their aquatics experience in the pool and aquatics opportunities that exist

at MSI,” said Ortiz.

“We figured, if they’re here on the campus of a world-renowned research institution of higher education, why not have them engage with it?” he continued. “In our business of early academic outreach, we normally work with middle school and high school students but we know that the sooner we can engage a student’s imagination about going to college, the better. By getting third-graders involved and interacting with the campus, they can see themselves here. Going to college is no longer something that only other people do. They can see and feel it as a real option for themselves.”

To Debi Badger, child development and afterschool program director for the Santa Barbara Unified School District, the 3GSCP is “a blessing and an unbelievable opportunity” for the children in the A-OK program and in the school district. While the swimming lessons provide an invaluable skill, the tour shows them an avenue by which they can continue their educations after high school.

“A-OK has a [college-going] curriculum, and this program ties it all in,” Badger said. “In terms of preparation for college, though, we go all the way down to the first grade, just to let them know of the opportunities that are available to them.”

Added Ortiz: “We want to plant seeds of hope and inspiration when our students tour the campus. Last fall, it was music to my ears when I heard not one or two but several third-graders say, ‘This is my campus. I’m coming to UCSB when I grow up!’”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.