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A swimming program for Tibetan residents in Sydney’s northern beaches highlights the importance of volunteers and community organisations.

Summer by the pool is a ritual for many Australians, but for residents from other parts of the world, vitals skills around water safety can be missing. To address this concern for Tibetan residents living in Sydney’s northern beaches, Tanya Carmont founded Water Skills for Life, a community program that’s now been running since 2010.



Tanya founded the not-for-profit after volunteering on a similar program in Vietnam, where statistics around drowning are very bad – “as many as 30 children drowning each day” – and working as an adult swimming instructor at the Warringah Aquatic Centre, where she noticed a number of Tibetan residents in attendance.

“I happened to ask the question one day to a couple of my students, was there a large community of Tibetans living in the area?” says the 56-year-old, who has lived in the area all her life, but recently spent a year living in Hoi An in Vietnam volunteering under the Australian Government’s AVID program. “The answer was yes – around 800 at that time living in or around Dee Why.”

Tanya inquired if the community would be interested in a swim program and it was another yes. “I then found out that some of them had recently had near drowning experiences, so it was very timely,” she says.

Like most community programs, Water Skills for Life relies on volunteers, donations and grants to survive. In September 2016, a \$1000 Community 100 Grant from Lions Australia ensured up to 30 participants – from as young as four years of age – could undertake a 10-week swimming skills program, held at the Terrey Hills Swim Centre. In turn, Water Skills for Life have been able to train, over the past five years, six Tibetan residents to become qualified swim instructors themselves.

The Community 100 grant, presented to Tanya by the Frenchs Forest Lions Club, covered the cost of bus hire and transport to and from the venue. “These grants are extremely important,” says Tanya. “It means that we are able to deliver the programs to the community without burdening my dedicated volunteers trying to do fundraising.”

“They were quite appreciative,” says Keith Wilson from the Frenchs Forest Lions Club, who was impressed with the program’s aims and level of organisation.

Last year, the 29-member Frenchs Forest Club gave away \$35,000, with key projects including Bear Cottage in Manly, a refuge for children with terminal illness and their families, motor neuron disease, ovarian cancer and kids cancer research. Keith, 71, joined the club nine years ago to

meet new people and believes the companionship, along with doing something for your community, are the best facets of being a Lion.

It's not without its challenges, though. "It's getting harder to sell things now – people don't carry money as much these days," says Keith. The club's ageing population is also a concern. "We've got an original member who's been there for 56 years," says Keith. "The average age would be 70, so it's getting a bit hard to run. We've got about 29 members, but you can only count on about 12-15 to do projects. It's hard to get new members."

Volunteering time and skills to your community is well worth it, says Tanya. "The majority of my volunteers work during the week and dedicate time on a weekend to help as swim teachers and support staff," she says. "They are dedicated, passionate and reliable people who have an affinity with helping others in their community."

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