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Push to instil water safety and skills in Sydney's migrant communities

By [Ava Benny-Morrison](#)

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Like many Australians, Tanya Carmont developed her swimming skills in saltwater.

Many hours were spent gliding through the ocean in the idyllic learning environment of a Sydney rock pool.



Water Skills For Life president Tanya Carmont is leading the charge to bring swimming skills to immigrants. CHRISTOPHER PEARCE

She now devotes her time teaching the lifesaving skills synonymous with many Australians' upbringings to refugees who emigrated from Tibet to the northern beaches with no swimming ability.

Her students are an example of the immigrant community members targeted in a push for greater swim safety education programs.





Rescue services search for a man who went missing after wading into a river in the Kangaroo Valley. SES

[In the recent spate of drownings in NSW](#), police believe some victims – including foreign students and adults of non-English-speaking backgrounds – had hindered swimming abilities.

Among them was a Nepalese 25-year-old swept to his death in the Kangaroo Valley on Boxing Day when he waded into a river in waist-deep water, and a 56-year-old man who entered the surf at an unpatrolled South Coast beach despite not being a strong swimmer

The Royal Life Saving Society says it is finding the children of immigrants are being affected by their parents' inability to swim after growing up in a culture or landlocked countries where water safety was non-existent.

Ms Carmont noticed Dee Why was home to one of the country's largest Tibetan populations, about the same time she noticed many were falling victim to near-drownings.

"They are almost all refugees, about 95 per cent of them," the Water Skills For Life president said of the Tibetan swim students.

"Some of them have really horrific stories about what happened to them and escaping Tibet. They were just very happy to be able to come to Australia.

"Because it was so different to where they were from, they just loved being down the beach and having the opportunity to be in the water."

Ms Carmont's not-for-profit organisation also offers lessons to children and adults from disadvantaged families and other immigrant groups, teaching them in a rock pool at Collaroy.

She relies on grants from local organisations and the selflessness of volunteers to run the program. Since it started, some Tibetan students have gone on to become qualified swim teachers.



Instilling community members from non-English-speaking backgrounds with water skills has become a growing focus for many swim safety organisations.

Sujan Sharma, 27, drowned in a river in the Kangaroo Valley south of Sydney. FACEBOOK

In 2015, the Royal Life Saving Society ran a swim and survival program with the Old Guildford Public School after learning only four out of 400 students were capable of swimming 50 metres and could compete in the swimming carnival.

This is an example of the some 50 per cent of children who leave primary school without being able to swim, according to the society.

"The program like the one in Guildford is a safety net, and we would like to see them delivered across schools in a more systematic fashion," Royal Life Saving CEO Justin Scarr said.

Aquatic Safety Training Academy facility manager Matt Griffiths said more and more he was seeing students coming through schools in Sydney with no swimming education.

"In Australia it's hard to imagine not jumping in a pool with our child or going to the beach but for some communities in western Sydney, that's a reality," he said.

"They have never had the education or the awareness in their culture or upbringing about swimming."

Mr Griffiths said the learn-to-swim program for adults at the Seven Hills academy was one of the most popular but more could be done in this area.

"It's hard to say there is enough being done when there are people out there drowning," he said.



Ava Benny-Morrison



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