

## Joani Maskell Success Story, Swimming Safari Swim School May 28, 2021

By Lorrie DeFrank



Few vocations are as vital in Florida as teaching people how to swim. With water everywhere, drownings in the Sunshine State exceed most others, particularly for children younger than 5 who have the highest rates of all. Owner and founder of Swimming Safari Swim School, Joani Maskell has been teaching swimming since she instructed neighbor kids in her family's back yard pool as a preteen in her native New York.

This summer, she will be recognized by the Jacksonville Women's Business Center for earning its Entrepreneurial Certificate for completing its core suite of programs. Her professional achievements have certainly prevented countless disasters by sharing skills that save lives. Before reaching out to JAX Chamber and its programs such as JWBC, she thought of swim instruction as more of a hobby than a business, though.

"I give them a lot of credit," she said of her success. "From the very first day I connected with them, JWBC was awesome. It was like a pipe dream for me to have a swim school. Now I am doing what I love. There is nothing better than seeing in a child's eyes, 'I can do this!'"

While earning her master's degree in special education at the University of Florida, she continued teaching swimming part time in back yard, community and apartment pools. After marrying Cliff Maskell the couple settled in his hometown of Jacksonville, where she taught school for five years then worked in reservations for Delta Airlines for 15. A mother of two when the airline office closed, "I went back to my love of teaching swimming," said Maskell, who had maintained her lifeguard certification since age 14.

Limited by the seasons, she again taught at various outdoor locations and rented a scuba shop pool for a year and a half. In the mid-90s she attended a U.S. Swim School Association conference in Houston that was like a catapult from a high dive. "I was floored by these people who started in their back yards like I did," she recalled. "I could have a real swim school, too!"

Soon after the conference she incorporated her business in 2006, the year she walked into JWBC's Norwood Avenue office in search of the support and business skills she needed to make her dream a reality.

"It was incredible," she said. "I had no idea about accounting and marketing." JWBC's Financial Matters program helped her decipher business and financial statements and Marketing Matters helped her create brochures, a logo and business cards to promote her lessons, long before social media made that easier.

"They have all these lucrative courses to help you and advise you, at any stage of business," she said.

By the time she was ready to build her own swim facility in 2014, Maskell was accepted into the first cohort of JAX Bridges, an intensive business enhancement program. "They make you think about how to expand your business, where to get financial loans and how to connect with big business," said Maskell.

Having her own building, Maskell no longer travels to 15 different pools around the city to teach. Her 7,000-square-foot swim school off Hodges and J. Turner Butler boulevards in Jacksonville includes an indoor pool with a viewing room for parents and employs nearly 40 people, most of whom are instructors. Classes for babies to adults have such names as Happy Hippos, Terrific Tigers and Amazing Alligators.

“More than 1,000 kids go through a week,” she said. “We had twice that many before the pandemic started but it’s increasing every week.” Maskell said good business practices acquired through JWBC also helped her business stay afloat during the difficult past year.

Swimming Safari Swim School recently partnered with Hope Floats Foundation, a national nonprofit whose mission is to prevent drownings by providing scholarships for swim lessons based on financial need. According to the National Institute of Health, swimming lessons can reduce the risk of drowning by 88 percent.

“Living in Florida, it’s so important for everyone to learn to swim,” said Maskell, who, through this partnership, is doing her part to make that possible.

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