

**HALI JAMA:** Jumana Tanner has spent hours and hours in Milwaukee on the shores of Lake Michigan watching the water.

**JUMANA TANNER:** The weather changes so quick at the lake. Like you don't reckon. You'll go there, and it's like 90 degrees. And then all of a sudden, it's pouring rain on you. You had no clue where these clouds came from. They came within seconds, and it's just pouring rain. I couldn't believe it.

**HALI JAMA:** The thing about the Great Lakes is that you never know just by looking at them what is going on under the surface. Jumana was a Wisconsin Sea Grant intern in the summer of 2021. Her job was to go to Bradford Beach in Milwaukee during the busiest hours and talk to people about what might be going on beneath the surface of the water.

**JUMANA TANNER:** And I even had this one gentleman. I was talking to him about rip currents. I was like, do you know what it means to be pulled out there? He's like, yeah, last week, I almost drowned. And I was like, wait, wait. No, wait, what?

He was like, at a pier, because he knows that he can't really swim that well. So he was at a pier where he at least had something there. A huge wave came by, and all of a sudden, next to the wood, it sucked him in. Next to piers especially, there is a large amount of rip currents because the water gets stuck against the wood, and then it has to go right back out. It's like a perfect path.

So people don't know that swimming next to piers is dangerous. And he's like, I didn't see any signs or maybe I didn't pay attention or whatever. Somebody helped me, saved me, but I nearly drowned.

**HALI JAMA:** Today, we're talking about the hidden currents of the Great Lakes and how to change a culture around swimming when racism is the water we swim in.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

From Wisconsin Sea Grant, I'm Hali.

**BONNIE** And I'm Bonnie.

**WILLISON:**

**HALI JAMA:** And you're listening to *The Water We Swim in*, stories about the Great Lakes and the people working towards equity.

**BONNIE WILLISON:** Wisconsin Sea Grant is based at UW Madison, which occupies the traditional land of the Ho-Chunk people. The stories on this podcast span the area we now know as Wisconsin, where the lands and waters are cared for by the 12 native nations that call Wisconsin home.

**HALI JAMA:** Jumana was talking to a man who almost drowned at the beach. Does this happen a lot at Milwaukee beaches?

**BONNIE** Unfortunately, yeah. It's kind of a big problem.

**WILLISON:**

**BRENDA COLEY:** Because of the pandemic, the beautiful thing about it is that we saw more people of color, especially Black people recreating outdoors. And we had some tragedy down at the lake, though. We had three Black men drowned at McKinley Beach trying to save children.

**BONNIE** The issue is that the water can look calm on the surface, but there's rip currents going on underneath.

**WILLISON:**

**BRENDA COLEY:** And people don't necessarily know that if they're not familiar. So there's one thing to learn how to swim, but you also have to learn how to keep yourself safe in the water. And swimming is not necessarily enough for that.

**BONNIE WILLISON:** That was Brenda Coley, a longtime activist in Milwaukee's Black community. She does environmental justice work as the co-executive director of Milwaukee Water Commons. It's great when more people are able to have fun outdoors, especially people of color who've been historically excluded from natural spaces. But with more people out on the beach, safety becomes more of a concern. What's really tragic is that four individuals died while enjoying Milwaukee's McKinley Beach in the summer of 2020.

On June 3, a boater, who hasn't been publicly identified, died while searching for two swimmers who were later found safe. J'Varius Bankhead who was 19 drowned on July 20 in 2020 after saving his two young cousins. On August 8, Jesse Brock who was 50 attempted to save Tony Bishop who was 14, and they both passed away, although Brock was able to save 14-year-old Daniel Rivera. As Brenda noted, three of those men were African-American.

**BRENDA COLEY:** It's complicated. That's the issue. So there is racism involved with this. There is historical trauma involved with this. There is desegregation involved with this. There is no opportunity to get to places to swim.

I was at a meeting once. And there were five of us, and we were talking about what we did that weekend. Every one of them had done something really big on the water but me. And so I'm trying-- it was very striking to me that it was part of their culture to recreate during the holidays on the water.

You look around when white people are recreated, do you see people of color? You do not. So it becomes a cultural thing. It's a normal natural thing. And that's not the case among poor people and people of color. So how do we make that part of their culture too?

**BONNIE WILLISON:** So Hali, what's your relationship with swimming?

**WILLISON:**

**HALI JAMA:** Yeah, so for the beginning of my life up until maybe I was like 15 years old, I didn't really have a relationship with swimming or any form of ability to swim. I lived in Eden Prairie, Minnesota. We did have lessons offered in elementary school for sixth graders to take swimming classes. It was required actually for all sixth grade students to take swimming lessons.

But the year before I became a sixth grader, my fifth grade year, there was a little boy that ended up drowning because of the lack of supervision. And during this time, my sister was also in sixth grade. And she was literally right after him. So once his class ended, she was going to go in for her lessons.

And it was just very tragic. He ended up drowning. And many parents were very angry, but my parents were really just like scared more than anything because they were probably thinking like that could have been my daughter. That could have been you next year. So their thought process was basically that you're staying away from water just so you can avoid drowning.

But later on when I finally got my first job, I ended up working at the Eden Prairie Community Center as a child caretaker. Part of my job was doing a lot of activities with many of the kids. And many of those activities involved water-related activities like going to the pool. And I talked to my boss about it. I was like, if one of these kids drowned, I would probably drown with them. It's not going to work out.

A few of my other coworkers actually didn't know how to swim either. So we ended up getting lessons at the community center.

**BONNIE** Yeah, do you have any memories from swimming lessons?

**WILLISON:**

**HALI JAMA:** Yeah. At this point, I was pretty tall. And the pool we were learning in was like four feet. And I'm literally 5' 8", 5' 9". So I just remember feeling really awkward because there was also like literal children learning with me. And I was like, this is so embarrassing, honestly.

But now, I'm really grateful that I learned it because it's a really good thing to be able to do. And it's a really nice activity in the summer as well, to just cool down.

**BONNIE** Yeah, I'm curious about taking swimming lessons at-- you said you were 15-ish?

**WILLISON:**

**HALI JAMA:** Yeah, I was--

**BONNIE** Yeah, at that age. Because I don't remember much about when I learned to swim. I was probably four or five. So  
**WILLISON:** I'm white, and I'm from a predominantly white rural town in southern Wisconsin. I actually grew up on a lake. My mom grew up on that lake as well. So I was really around water all the time.

And all of our little towns around my area had a community pool. So that was a pretty common activity as well for myself and friends to go to these community pools. And that's where I learned to swim.

**HALI JAMA:** It seems like you were just environmentally just surrounded by water. So you literally had to just be indulged in it as well.

**BONNIE** Right. I think even having access to live on a lake and having access to that water plays a big role in just  
**WILLISON:** swimming being part of my culture. And how would you say your access to the water was growing up in Minnesota?

**HALI JAMA:** So when I was growing up, I lived near Minneapolis. And I did have access to pools that my friends had, and I did have access to lakes nearby where we lived. But I didn't really like participate in any water activities because of the little boy that ended up drowning at our elementary school. So luckily, we both learned to swim in a pool and have that access in the first place, but not every community has equal access to the water.

**BRENDA** African-American children have been disengaged from the water through no fault of their own. And one of the  
**COLEY:** problems is that outdoor spaces have been traditionally white spaces

**BONNIE** Dr. Deidre Peroff has researched swimming disparities since she started working at Wisconsin Sea Grant's  
**WILLISON:** Milwaukee office in 2016. For Deidre, a few statistics just kept coming up again and again in her research.

**DEIDRE** The today African-Americans, and increasingly Latinos, live in economically distressed inner city neighborhoods  
**PEROFF:** that have swimming pool deserts. So that's the big thing, is where are the swimming pools located and are they accessible, physically accessible to people that live close in that neighborhood, or do they have to take three buses or drive 30 minutes to go to a pool where they can access swimming pools and lessons?

**BONNIE** Secondly, African-American children, without regards to age or income, are up to five times more likely to drown  
**WILLISON:** than white children. And third, almost 70% of African-American children have little swimming ability or no swimming ability.

**DEIDRE** So that's a huge one. 70%, right? The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention concluded that a major factor  
**PEROFF:** for the difference in Black and white drowning rates is the lack of swimming facilities available to Black youth.

**BONNIE** Deidre remembers sitting in a coffee shop with Brenda Coley back in 2017. They'd been collaborating on water  
**WILLISON:** education and recreation for a few years at this point.

**DEIDRE** Brenda and I got together and said maybe we could figure out how to map this in Milwaukee and see if the  
**PEROFF:** geographic disparities is something that's really obvious in Milwaukee, and that that's preventing people from developing these relationships or learning how to swim. And I remember we were at a coffee shop. And she drew out a piece of paper that she had this idea that there's this whole inner city area, which is pretty big in Milwaukee.

The northern part of Milwaukee is over 80% Black. The southern part is mostly Latino. And then there's the white on the coast like a little thin line.

**BONNIE** Brenda had a hypothesis that the poor and Black communities largely on Milwaukee's north side don't have  
**WILLISON:** access to swimming pools. So Deidre offered to do some research and map this out.

**DEIDRE** We found data on swimming pools going all the way back to the 1930s in Milwaukee. And basically ended up  
**PEROFF:** making a interactive map that showed since the 1930s, where in the city have pools been built and then where they've been closed. And by closed, I mean sometimes they're completely close. Sometimes they get turned into a splash pad, something small.

And so what we found was actually pretty alarming. You can see all of these pools popping up throughout the northern and southern and the central coastal part of Milwaukee. And then around somewhere in the '90s, it shifts where a lot of them just disappear. So you see all these little icons going away.

**BRENDA** The opportunities to learn how to swim and swimming pools in the Black community has dwindled. And if you  
**COLEY:** look at the swimming pools that exist in the city, we looked at it, and it looks like a big donut hole.

**BONNIE** Deidre worked with an organization called Reflow to add her data to their Milwaukee community map on Google  
**WILLISON:** earth. And I'm on their website right now, and I've downloaded the map. And the link is in our show notes if you want to find this as well.

So I'm going to click on pools through time and click Play. And I can see from the 1930s and then all the way to the present, you can see pools pop up and disappear. And I can see here on Milwaukee's north side, in the last 20 years, about five pools have closed.

And this hasn't just happened in Milwaukee. It's actually a nationwide trend. Every time we see a recession, there tends to be new waves of pool closures. These pool closures affect poor and working-class Americans most severely. And who happens to be overrepresented in the urban poor? But Black Americans. So they've been disproportionately affected by pool closures.

Back in Milwaukee, Deidre has done all this research. She's put it down onto a map. And she can fast forward through the decades to the present day.

**DEIDRE** In the northern part of the city, there was one pool that was still open in this area. And that's Lincoln Park pool.  
**PEROFF:**

**BONNIE** Just as Deidre has finished researching this map and it's all ready to publish, she got some troubling news.  
**WILLISON:**

**DEIDRE** Right when we were getting ready to publish this, we received notification that they wanted to close Lincoln Park  
**PEROFF:** pool. And we thought that was really interesting timing because we had just come out and shown that basically people in this part of the city had no access to swimming pools in the summer or for lessons. And they were proposing to close it.

**BONNIE** Deidre wasn't the only one who was surprised at this proposal to close the pool.  
**WILLISON:**

**SALLY CALLAN:** No, I think we heard about it in the newspaper. And it was this little blurb that said this pool is going to close.

**CHERYL** So once we did the newspaper. And then did the meeting take place at my house then? Yeah.  
**BLED SOE:**

**SALLY CALLAN:** Because we knew that we really had to do something. So it was more of a--

**BONNIE** Cheryl and Sally our neighbors. They live in the Lincoln Park neighborhood.  
**WILLISON:**

**CHERYL** My name is Cheryl Bledsoe. And I am a lifelong resident of the Lincoln Park neighborhood. So I'm living in the  
**BLED SOE:** house that I grew up in. And I learned how to swim in Lincoln Park.

**SALLY CALLAN:** My name is Sally Callan. I've lived in this house for 35 years. So it's home.

**BONNIE** I've never been to Lincoln Park, so Cheryl and Sally described it to me. The park seems pretty big. It's big enough  
**WILLISON:** for a basketball court, soccer field, football field, and cricket. And the Milwaukee River runs right through it. So you'll see people fishing and canoeing and water boarding.

The Schulz Aquatic Center looks pretty fun too. There's curving slides and colorful umbrellas. That older pool that Cheryl learned to swim at was replaced by this new aquatic center in 2009. And less than 10 years after this new aquatic center was built, the county proposes to shut it down.

**SALLY CALLAN:** The pool came up as an issue because of budgets. And so somehow conveniently, the budget said, well, if we took out this pool, we'd have enough money. If you look at the studies, the only pools they were closing were the ones on the north side. There are still more pools on the south side than the north side. And it just seemed absolutely racist to say that this was the solution for the county parks' budget.

**BONNIE** So the community got together. And they were actually pretty practiced at organizing together at this point

**WILLISON:** because they had formed a group called the Friends of Lincoln Park two years before. So people in the neighborhood already knew each other. They already liked working together. And that really helped them get a quick start on this pool issue.

**SALLY CALLAN:** We got together and met in Cheryl's basement. And we talked about doing our posters. And we talked about getting the students involved, and it went from there.

**BONNIE** After that first meeting, the big plan of action was to go to the county board meeting at the courthouse. It all

**WILLISON:** started to happen very quickly.

**SALLY CALLAN:** They'd told us we needed to be there for the public hearing. So we knew we had to be downtown. We knew we had to be ready and ready to speak. And it was cold, I recall.

**SUBJECT 1:** Well, there may be a last minute fix to keep a north pool off the chopping block.

**SUBJECT 2:** The county executive, Chris Abele--

**BONNIE** Cheryl was a principal at the time. And a lot of her students lived in the Lincoln park neighborhood, and they

**WILLISON:** used the pool. So on the day of the big demonstration that they had been planning, it was really important to Cheryl that she get her students involved.

**CHERYL** Once I went to school, and we got on the school van, and I took those students, and we went down there. We did.

**BLED SOE:** We drove right down there. Sure did.

**SALLY CALLAN:** Right, right, right.

**CROWD:** Save our pool. Save our pool. Save our pool.

**SALLY CALLAN:** We had students doing the press conference. We had younger students doing the meeting in front of the county supervisors. And then we had little kids in the audience just watching.

**CHERYL** Yeah, they were.

**BLED SOE:**

**SALLY CALLAN:** And then we had grandmas. And I think the issue of who is the one who's going to be watching the kids at the pool, it's usually the grandma. And so that was a big message to supervisors that these are families. These are people who are very much a part of how we should be thinking of what the services are that we offer. And a big part of that is parks. And for our neighborhood, that part is the pool.

**BONNIE** Sally still has some of the posters that the students made and held during the demonstration that day. She held

**WILLISON:** them up for Cheryl to see on our video call.

**SALLY CALLAN:** OK, here's one. Well, I've got the three out of five children can't swim, don't close our pool.

**CHERYL** Here we go. I think that's Ziggy's right there.

**BLED SOE:**

**SALLY CALLAN:** This is very important.

**CHERYL** 70% of African-Americans don't know how to swim, so don't close our pool. Right.

**BLED SOE:**

**SALLY CALLAN:** This is one of my favorites too.

**CHERYL** Community is dependent on our pool. Summer jobs, place for the youth. Yes. Closing my pool is mean. Yeah.

**BLED SOE:**

**BONNIE** That day they spent protesting at the courthouse paid off.

**WILLISON:**

**SALLY CALLAN:** We were victorious.

**BONNIE** The county board decided to spare the Schulz Aquatic Center and look into other ways that they can fix their

**WILLISON:** budget problems.

**SALLY CALLAN:** By saying this is wrong, it became a discussion. And I think then it was-- that's not what we do in Milwaukee County. That's not how we take care of our families.

**BONNIE** Thanks to Cheryl, Sally, and the rest of the Lincoln Park community, the pool remains open. But still, it's one of

**WILLISON:** the only one for miles.

**BRENDA** So we have to really raise expectations for people to have to pools in the community. And until we do that, until

**COLEY:** people have opportunities, it becomes part of the culture, we're not going to get African-American and other people of color swimming the way that we need to for this to be a truly a wider centric city.

**BONNIE** Up next, we take a look at Milwaukee's biggest swimming pool, Lake Michigan. Jumana Tanner takes us on a walk

**WILLISON:** along the beach.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**JUMANA** People don't really take the lake seriously, of course, because it's just a lake. It's not the ocean, but it actually

**TANNER:** does have some pretty dangerous consequences with the right kind of weather.

**BONNIE** Milwaukee is facing a lot of challenges in 2020, a series of drownings right after the other, a lifeguard shortage,

**WILLISON:** and the pandemic was leading more and more people outside. Deidre, Brenda, and their partners came together to ask, what can we do about this? After a brainstorming meeting, they decided to create the Beach Ambassador program. Jumana was the first Wisconsin Sea Grant intern on the project.

**HALI JAMA:** So Jumana is also a student at UW Madison. Even though she is studying zoology and marine biology, the Beach Ambassador's program still caught her eye.

**JUMANA** What really grabbed me in was the fact that it was a pilot program. And they've never done anything like it. So

**TANNER:** they were looking for people who are like, OK, we're just going to jump in and get into it. I love trying new things and just seeing where this takes me, especially if it means influencing people and teaching others about science.

I myself am like an-- I'm an artist. I like to paint and everything. And I've also got my scientific side. I've always looked at scientific journals. And I've been like, OK, this is complex, and it has a right to be complex. But at the same time, if it's important for the public to understand, to some extent, we have to change it in words that they can understand so that you don't have to have a PhD to understand what's going on in your environment.

**HALI JAMA:** On a regular day, as the beach ambassador, Jumana's main goal was to talk to people and give them information, so they can protect themselves and hopefully share that information with others. They did this by walking around Bradford Beach with a blue little cart. Most people would expect ice cream or refreshments. Instead, they filled it with water safety information.

**JUMANA  
TANNER:** I taught them about longshore currents and just beach safety, where to look for signs for water quality, what it means, what it means whenever there's a storm.

**HALI JAMA:** Although Jumana was teaching people, she also learned a lot about racial disparities in swimming.

**JUMANA  
TANNER:** A lot of the times when I spoke with people of color at the beach, they didn't have background knowledge of rip currents or longshore currents because sometimes they didn't have swimming abilities or sometimes they did, and they just weren't taught that stuff.

**HALI JAMA:** She also addressed the impact of the minority gap with swimming.

**JUMANA  
TANNER:** Since Milwaukee's hyper segregated, people of color like Black people, Hispanics, they didn't have adequate access to resources to learn about how to swim in a lake or how to be safe. But it was also especially people who didn't live next to the lake. You're not going to have access to that kind of knowledge if you don't even have access to the actual resource itself.

**BONNIE  
WILLISON:** So Jumana was there to kind of keep people safe, but I'm wondering did she ever encounter any dangerous situation like someone actually was starting to drown or someone was unsafe in the water?

**HALI JAMA:** Yeah, there was one time where she and her fellow beach ambassador saw someone in the distance who seemed to be struggling, but they couldn't really tell just because of the distance. And they couldn't tell if the person was on a jet ski or if they should be worried. So Jumana called the sailing center. And luckily, they had a boat, and they went out to check on the person. And the person was fine.

So that response happened in only a few minutes. And Jumana was part of that and the way they acted quickly. It's just better to know that the person is safe rather than just assume that they are, you know?

**BONNIE  
WILLISON:** Yeah. So what actually is a longshore current?

**HALI JAMA:** Yeah, so let's break it down. So when a wave reaches a beach or a coastline, it releases a burst of energy that generates a current, which runs parallel to the shoreline. This type of current is called a longshore current.

**BONNIE  
WILLISON:** So longshore currents are going parallel to the shore, so what is a rip current then?

**HALI JAMA:** Yeah, so a rip current on the other hand, are very powerful narrow channels of fast-moving water that are prevalent along the east, gulf and west coasts of the US as well as all along the shores of the Great Lakes.



**BONNIE WILLISON:** And that's really interesting because obviously, people think rip currents, you think oceans, but yeah, the Great Lakes have those too. So if you get caught in a longshore current or a rip current, what do you do?

**HALI JAMA:** Yeah, so before we get into how to escape, let's talk about avoiding having to escape in the first place. So rip currents are often difficult to see, but you can spot them in areas where waves aren't breaking or where there's foam, seaweed, or discolored water being pulled offshore. If you miss those signs and end up getting stuck anyway, here are a few tips from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, or NOAA. They suggest that you try to stay afloat, yell for help, swim parallel to the shore, and do not exhaust yourself fighting the currents.

**BONNIE WILLISON:** OK, great. That will be helpful. So try to stay calm, swim parallel to the shore, try to get help, and stay afloat.

**HALI JAMA:** Exactly. Now that we understand the currents of the lake, let's get back to the historical roots of the currents of society.

**JUMANA TANNER:** I actually learned that it's a huge thing because of redlining and systemic racism and during segregation and Jim Crow, where Black people especially were kicked out of swimming pools. So they were even more frightened from actually utilizing water and swimming. But that was a big thing, was outreaching people of color and minorities to understanding this stuff as well.

**HALI JAMA:** So Brenda Coley is helping lead Milwaukee Water Commons to a really ambitious goal, which is a part of their water city agenda. Brenda thinks that every child in Milwaukee should learn how to swim.

**BRENDA COLEY:** When I was a young woman, I almost drowned. And so when I had a child, one of the first things his father and he did was teach my son how to swim. He was six months old. And we put him in the pool. We found a program, and we put him in the pool.

So I think we have to talk about and raise that expectation of learning how to swim. But at the same time, you have to have then places for them to go to learn how to swim. So you put it-- you do it structurally. For example, you could have swimming as a part of the curriculum to make sure that you have to learn how to swim to graduate. You provide recreational opportunities.

You provide information. You get lifeguards down at the beach. And raise those expectations and give that-- engage the community around those issues. So it would take a program.

**HALI JAMA:** In the meantime, people like Jumana are out on the beach helping people know how to enjoy Lake Michigan without being undermined by its hidden currents.

**BRENDA COLEY:** Yeah, the thing about racism, I think is the water we swim in. And fish don't know they're in water. That's their life, and the same thing with us. I think that we don't at times understand how pervasive it really is.

**HALI JAMA:** As we end this episode we want to keep in mind and pay tribute to J'Varius Bankhead, Jesse Brock, Tony Bishop, and all those who have lost their lives in Lake Michigan and those who have risked their lives trying to save their fellow beachgoers.

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The Water we Swim In is produced by Bonnie Willison and Halimo Jama. Please subscribe, rate, and review and share this podcast with a friend. You can find Wisconsin Sea Grant at [seagrant.wisc.edu](http://seagrant.wisc.edu). You can find the Wisconsin Water Resources Institute at [wri.wisc.edu](http://wri.wisc.edu). Thanks for tuning in. We'll see you next time.

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