

Youngsters dive into special classroom



Larry Phippen teaches Bijou fourth-graders how to be better swimmers. Photos/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

Holding on to the side of the pool the youngsters kick as hard as they can, causing Larry Phippen to close his eyes with all that water headed in his direction.

He's telling them to turn their heads and breath. Later they grab kickboards to make their way across the width of the pool. Other times they are going after rings at the bottom of the pool.

The noise from all of these kids at the South Lake Tahoe pool is deafening under the dome.

"I think this is a great opportunity. It doesn't matter who the person is. If they are going to a public school, it's

important for a city when they have a facility like this to offer something back to the community where it doesn't cost anything," Phippen told *Lake Tahoe News*. He is the instructor for this swim program and is also a coach with the private Tahoe Swim Club.



Jasmine Perez kicks along the wall.

Since the mid-1980s the city and Lake Tahoe Unified School District have had a partnership where every fourth-grader has the opportunity to learn to swim at no cost to the student.

The kids are divided into beginner, intermediate and advanced groups. Each class receives one week of instruction for about an hour a day.

"A lot of families have never been to the swim center. And a lot of kids have never been swimming before today," Rebecca Musalo, Bijou Community School teacher, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Hugo Perez is in the beginner group, which is staying in the shallow end where everyone can touch the bottom. Some in this group, like Hugo, have swum before but are not proficient, while others are new to the sport.

Hugo likes floating on his back the best.

"I feel like I'm in a bed on the water," Hugo told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The hardest part was learning to turn his head in the water to breathe.



Hugo Perez practices floating on his back.

His dad, Hugo Perez Sr., was on the pool deck watching with admiration. This is how he chose to spend his day off – watching his son become more adept at an activity that he likes.

Safety in and around water is the overriding lesson all levels are taught. This includes being able to tread water and float on their back.

Everyone helping the kids is a certified safety water instructor. The program is nationally recognized by the American Red Cross Learn to Swim Program.

"What surprises me around here is you have a lot of public free access to beach areas, but not a lot of guards," Phippen said, underlining the importance of being self-reliant. "We teach them how they can survive in water and feel comfortable."

At the end of the week, each student is given a handout stating what level they are at and what program would be ideal for them if they chose to take more lessons at the recreation center. The city offers swim lessons throughout the year.