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FEATURED

## Schlitterbahn goes for record to promote water safety

By Jordan Gass-Poore' New Braunfels Herald-Zeitung

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Yesenia McCreless helps her daughter, Bella McCreless, float on her back during the World's Largest Swimming Lesson Tuesday at Schlitterbahn.

KATHRYN PARKER | Herald-Zeitung

The smell of sunscreen and chlorine lingered in the air as 92 participants waited in Schlitterbahn's Kristal Cove pool Tuesday morning for the start of the waterpark's annual World's Largest Swimming Lesson.

The event is designed to promote the importance of water safety.

At the sound of a whistle, participants, grouped by age, were guided in various swim moves by Schlitterbahn staff.

People received discounted admission to the park for their participation in the free swim lesson, which occurred simultaneously at hundreds of locations around the world, including all four Schlitterbahn Waterparks in a coordinated attempt to break the event's previous Guinness World Record of 24,873.

Angela Flournoy, Schlitterbahn's manager of corporate communications and events, said the waterpark hopes to promote the importance of teaching children to swim to prevent drowning, which is the second leading cause of unintentional (non-boating related) injury-related death for children between 1 and 14.

Children under 5 are at an even higher risk of drowning.

### **Colin's Hope**

Representatives from the event's co-sponsor, Colin's Hope, were in attendance to disperse water safety packets and share the group's namesake's story.

Last Thursday marked the fifth anniversary of the non-profit and 4-year-old Colin Holst's drowning in a South Austin public pool.

Colin's Hope's mission is to raise water safety awareness to prevent children from drowning. The group began collaborating with Schlitterbahn Waterparks four years ago and began participating in the World's Largest Swimming Lesson in 2011.

"The World's Largest Swimming Lesson is huge to us," said Alissa Magrum, Colin's Hope executive director. "Drowning is preventable."

Magrum said there are a series of water safety tips that, if followed, may create layers of protection to keep children safe in and around water.

Preventative measures include learning CPR, swimming only when a lifeguard is present, and assigning an adult "water guardian," whose sole responsibility is to watch children who are in the water.

Magrum said enrolling children under 4 in formal swim lessons reduces the risk of drowning by 88 percent. She added that those who cannot swim should always wear a U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jacket when in the water.

“Unfortunately, drowning doesn’t have any barriers or boundaries,” said Magrum, who began volunteering with the organization through her love of water and passion for keeping her 6-year-old daughter, Ella, and all children safe.

In the words of Holst, who would announce to his family and friends on particularly good days that he was having the “best day ever,” she wants every child to enjoy life in the water.

Holst’s story has changed the way Magrum and other Colin’s Hope representatives understand the effects and causes of drowning.

## Spreading the word

Yesenia McCreless participated in this year’s World’s Largest Swimming Lesson with other members of Mom’s Club of Kyle and their children.

This is the second year McCreless has been involved with the event through her volunteer work with Colin’s Hope, passing out water safety packets to Hays County residents and Schlitterbahn visitors.

“I’m here to help spread the word about water safety and swim lessons,” she said.

The water safety packets are expected to reach 70,000 households across the nation this year.

Magrum said Colin’s Hope representatives identify zip codes with the highest drowning rate among children using statistics from various entities, such as the Dell Children’s Medical Center of Central Texas in Austin.

According to the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, 27 children have drowned in the state this year. Harris County tops the list with eight drownings.

“Drowning can be quick and silent,” Magrum said. “Sometimes the body’s not yelling for help.”

Death can occur for those who are submerged under water for six to 10 minutes.

A banner featuring Holst at a pool wearing goggles, taken by his father the last day of swim lessons when he received a medal, is a reminder of this truth for her.

For McCreless, who was the pre-school teacher of Holst's older sister and has two young children of her own, it's "scary" to see children swimming unsupervised.

McCreless said she wears a neon orange-and-yellow stretchy bracelet around her wrist when in the water so children know she has taken the water guardian pledge through Colin's Hope.

The pledge includes maintaining a valid CPR certification, not becoming distracted, constantly watching children in the water and will be a guardian until relieved by an adult.

"My son (6-year-old Caleb) knows when a mom in the group has the bracelet and what it means," she said.