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# Drowning-prevention efforts ramping up as pool season begins

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**By Weldon B. Johnson**  
The Republic | azcentral.com  
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Druann Letter experienced every parent's nightmare on May 31, 1998.

Her 3-year-old son, Weston, wandered into the backyard swimming pool at their Gilbert home and drowned while Druann and her husband, Thomas, were busy in other parts of the house. Letter remains determined not to let her son's death be in vain and, as an educator, she quickly decided years ago what to do.

"At Weston's funeral, one of my first-graders came up to me and said, 'Mrs. Letter, if I was there I would have jumped in and saved Weston,'" said Letter, a teacher at Kyrene del Cielo Elementary School in Chandler.

"That was kind of the spark that started it. Is that really what they would do? We did a study at our school and found out that people know very little about water safety and what to do to be safe. That's how Water Watchers was started."

Water Watchers, the organization that Letter created, since has been adopted by Phoenix Children's Hospital. It is dedicated to delivering a simple message for keeping children safe around water that it calls the ABCs of water safety.

The organization's annual Water Safety Day was Tuesday morning at South Mountain Community College, attended by hundreds of first-grade students, dozens of volunteers and representatives of many Valley fire departments and other organizations dedicated to water safety.

It is among many such efforts embraced and supported by Southeast Valley fire departments in hopes of educating the public about the importance of water safety and what to do in an emergency. As pool season gets under way, many departments hand out water-safety materials in neighborhoods.

"We think one drowning is one too many," Mesa drowning-prevention coordinator Michele Long said. "Our goal is to get the message out there to as many individuals as possible."

Chandler Fire Department and volunteers are targeting neighborhoods in the southeastern portion of the city Saturday with water-safety materials. Gilbert, Mesa and many other cities are doing their door-to-door campaigns April 6 as part of a Valley-wide effort, in coordination with Cardon Children's Medical Center's Walk for Water Safety.

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Tempe distributes its water-safety materials throughout the year in visits to preschoolers and other youngsters.

Most departments take a year-round approach.

"Any time we do an event we carry the water-safety message with us," Chandler Fire Battalion Chief Tom Dwiggin said. "Let's say Intel is doing a safety-day event. We'll be there with coloring books and pamphlets. The water-safety message is going on throughout the year. It's part of our message now."

Tiffany Isaacson, water-safety coordinator for Water Watchers, said young children are receptive to the message. Children 5 and younger are the largest age group at risk for drowning, not only in swimming pools, rivers and canals, but also in unattended bathtubs, buckets and even toilets.

It is important for parents to discuss water safety with their children to make sure it resonates. The [curriculum](#) taught in schools before Water Safety Day includes take-home components designed to get that conversation started.

"If children learn, and that's where we stop, we've failed," Isaacson said. "We need the parents to have a conversation with the children around the dinner table, 'What did you do today at school?' If we don't reach out to the community effectively and teach them how urgent this is and how preventable this is, we've failed. We have to close that loop."

Experts agree that with proper education and vigilance, most drowning is preventable. As a result, the campaign to raise awareness will continue.

Letter is confident it is making a difference.

"One of my first-graders from the first year we did this had a baby last year," Letter said. "He came back and told me he remembered the things we'd taught them. He said because of that they were going to make sure their pool is secure."

Experts say that increased awareness and education are key to preventing incidents.

"All drownings are preventable, basically," said Tiffany Isaacson, Water Watchers water-safety coordinator. "Very seldom do we see a situation where we think, 'Wow, there's nothing we could have done.'"

**INFORMATION**

Information about water safety and drowning prevention:

- >> <http://www.phoenixchildrens.com/community/injury-prevention-center/water-safety/>
- >> <http://www.childrensafetyzone.com/go/>
- >> <http://www.preventdrownings.org/go/>

**VOLUNTEERS NEEDED**

The Gilbert and Mesa fire departments need volunteers to distribute water-safety materials during the April 6 Walk for Water Safety. Those interested in Gilbert can call 480-503-6300. In Mesa, call 480-644-2294.

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