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NEW BEDFORD HIGH SCHOOL LIFEGUARD CERTIFICATION PROGRAM HELPS FILL REGIONAL SHORTAGE

Innovative Aquatics program trains NBHS students to save lives as future lifeguards.

The hygienic scent of chlorinated pool water wafts out into the hall leading to New Bedford High School's pool complex. It includes newly renovated locker rooms and individual shower stalls that sparkle throughout with new tilework and chrome fixtures. Here students learn to swim and a select few train to save lives as future lifeguards.

The New Bedford High School Lifeguard Certification Program is in its third year and in that time, it has graduated approximately 30 lifeguards, according to Michael J. Gryss, who teaches history, coaches Boys Tennis, the Whalers Swim Team and oversees the lifesaving certification course.

A Whaler athlete and NBHS alum, Gryss notes, "I became a lifeguard when I was in high school in 2009. I worked at the Y and at other places. Every two years lifeguards must renew their certification but not many people do it. My friends and I were all lifeguards and we needed someone to recertify with, so I said I could do it and trained to become a lifeguard instructor. Then the high school hired me and it all came together with Coach Tim Curry, who was a great mentor, and still is. We have an excellent pool with adjacent classroom space. I had been coaching the swim team, in which we have been working to increase participation, and it has fostered a growing number of students taking part in Aquatics."

"Mr. Curry and I have the lifeguarding experience; he has much more experience than I do. It has just worked out all very well. Headmaster Coelho was been very supportive; so has Mr. Tarpey, our Athletics director," he said.

Tim Curry has been New Bedford High School's longstanding swim and dive coach since the early 1990s. A Whaler alum, Coach Curry's expertise in water safety training extends back to the 1980s as a lifeguard at Horseneck, one of the state's most popular (and sometimes precarious) high-surf beaches. "I know from a lot of personal experience just how critical a speedy response time to a water emergency can be in determining a positive outcome," he said, noting, "That's why NBHS' certification program is so important. Mike Gryss, Koby Verran and myself are committed to seeing that our students have the skills and respect for

the water that will serve them well throughout life and enable them to assist in saving lives, should they be called to do so.” A PE teacher stationed at the pool, Coach Curry often regales students with stories and real-life lessons in water safety.

Gryss taught his first lifeguard certification course at NBHS in spring 2018. He has certified about 30 new lifeguards since the program began. “I try to do about ten new guards per year. One instructor to ten lifeguard trainees is what the Red Cross likes to see in certification classes; any more than that number is not optimal,” he added.

The certification course takes approximately 40 hours of training, including traditional lifesaving course materials, in-person learning, lectures, discussions, tutorial videos, swimming skills practice and exercises. Additional online instruction has been blended into courses lately, Gryss notes, “But we always end up doing more than the minimal number of hours required thanks to all the extra help we get. For example, Gerry Fortes retired as a PE teacher but she is an active diving coach and has been super helpful to the program, volunteering a lot of her time and often serving as the on-duty lifeguard during in-water training sessions.”

There is a course fee; however, it is nominal compared with other certification programs, according to Gryss. “Our advantage is that NBHS has its own pool, so renting and scheduling time at a public pool is not a factor.” The Whalers’ six-lane pool is 25 yards long with a maximum depth of 12-feet. Renovations to the pool area have been in three major phases, starting in 2014 with completion in 2020. “As a result, we have one of the finest high school pool facilities in the region,” Gryss commented.

Headmaster Bernadette Coelho noted the school often plays an important role in community building in many different areas. “As with so many of our programs, New Bedford High’s excellent Aquatics program offer our student athletes expert training that builds strength, skill and self-confidence; and in this case, the certification program is also a path to an important job. I am incredibly proud of our lifesaving Whalers and their teachers in this vital work.”

Mary Rapoza, director of New Bedford's Department of Parks, Recreation and Beaches notes that New Bedford High School’s certification program is a double benefit to the community. “It provides an important public safety training resource locally ensuring that our beaches are safe for the public. The certified lifeguards are New Bedford young adults who are then employed at our City beaches.”

Gryss added, “Coach Curry’s aquatic experience is so broad – in a swim team way, in ocean beach way and in a general pool way; it is significant. He recruits the kids with me because he has amazing relationships with the students, and as a coach, and he is active in the Athletic department; so we do all work closely together.”

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Photo Caption:

LIFESAVING WHALERS – New Bedford High School teacher Michael J. Gryss (left) surveys rescue training exercises at the school’s pool. In its third year, the Lifeguard program has certified approximately 30 lifeguards, some of which work at city and regional beaches and pools. (Photo: Geraldine Fortes)