

State'sGreats

BY MARY WALTMAN

Like a victor over troubled waters, perhaps, Tom Griffiths helps others maintain pool safety

Tom Griffiths has a mission: to promote Penn State aquatic experiences that are fun and safe. As Penn State's director of aquatics and safety officer for athletics at University Park, as well as manager of the McCoy Natatorium, he oversees five campus pools and all the programs, schedules, policies and procedures included in the operation of the aquatics complex. And he takes his job to heart. "I am impassioned with saving lives," he says. "I have always done more than just manage the pool. I try to educate myself and teach others how to make swimming and pools safer and more enjoyable."

His concern for safety led to one of his most satisfying achievements, one that revolutionized the field of lifeguarding. As aquatics director, he conducted a National Lifeguard Survey that motivated him to develop the Five Minute Scanning Strategy, a technique to help guards stay alert by changing their mental and physical processes every five minutes. This innovative strategy, introduced at Penn State, is now used by more than 75 percent of the nation's water parks, and by all 35,000 Ellis Associates lifeguards worldwide. The concept was recently produced as a video.

To accommodate guards' use of this strategy, Griffiths, along with Paragon Aquatics, designed "Griff's Guard Station," a unique lifeguard stand with a wider base for standing and steps up the front for easy accessibility. Research has shown that guards remain more attentive when they use the stations, but Griffiths adds that it was his reference to the Seinfeld episode about the security guard who fell asleep because he was sitting down instead of standing that helped "ice the deal" with manufacturers.

Even though he always loved the water, he credits an apple farmer, who owned a lakeside water park where his family swam, as the inspiration for his career. As a young boy, he was hired to pick up ice

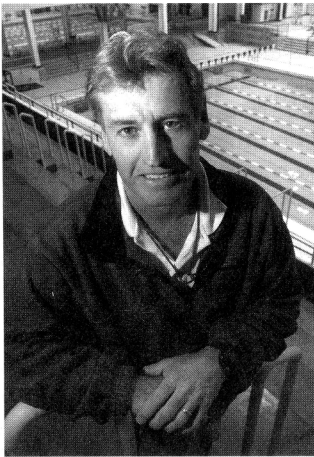
cream wrappers around the lake. "I learned from that farmer my first lesson about water safety," Griffiths says. Lifeguards helped by mentoring and supervising him, and by age 13 he was guarding the waterslides.

His interest in aquatics extended to the University of Maryland, where as a student he coached and taught aquatics. There he earned both a master's degree in physical education and a doctorate in education administration.

As a team coach visiting Penn State for swim meets, Griffiths says he "fell in love" with the then-new natatorium. So when the opportunity to join Penn State aquatics became available in 1986, he was eager to leave his tenured faculty position of three years at Indiana State University to accept his current position.

The McCoy Natatorium, built in 1967 and composed of three indoor pools and one heated outdoor pool, offers a wide range of aquatics and fitness programs. Classes are open not only for Penn State students, faculty and staff, but also for community members and visitors of varied age groups and abilities. Programs include those for the elderly and disabled and for athletes practicing scuba diving, water polo, aquacise and diving.

As manager, Griffiths also coordinates various competitive swimming and diving championships. He notes, however, that to host competitive events, Penn State needs a larger pool. A new pool would also free existing pools for more activities and programs. "It's frustrating because we can't meet the needs of the teams. Outside groups call almost every day to use the facilities, and we have to turn them down," he notes. Diverse groups such as ROTC, churches (for baptisms), researchers and submarine and homeland-security personnel have all made requests to use the facilities, which are open from 5 a.m. until midnight during the week.



Penn State Director of Aquatics Tom Griffiths revolutionized the way lifeguards monitor pools.

Greg Grieco/Penn State University

Being a part of Penn State's staff has also offered him instant credibility. Recently, he was honored by an invitation to address the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta for the development of model pool codes. As a representative of Penn State, he was the only water-safety person in attendance and consulted and collaborated with hundreds of the Center's epidemiologists. And in May 2004 Griffiths was honored to receive the prestigious Paragon Aquatic Safety Award for his "outstanding contributions to aquatic safety." The presentation ceremony was part of the International Swimming Hall of Fame Honors Weekend.

In addition to his responsibilities at Penn State, Griffiths is the founder of Aquatics Safety and Research Group, offering training and education programs specializing in risk management and aquatic safety. In 2005 he was profiled by Aquatics International as one of "the 25 most powerful people in the world of aquatics." As an expert on water safety and quality, Griffiths has authored several books, including *The Complete Swimming Pool Reference*, *The Swimming Pool*, *Better Beaches* (published by the National Recreation & Park Association) and *Safe Swimming Beaches* (by the Aquatic Safety Research Group). He currently serves as president of the National Aquatic Branch of the National Recreation & Park Association.

Water is not only important to Griffiths' career as researcher, teacher, writer and manager, but it has also been a source of relaxation. His favorite place for relaxing is the family cabin along the Delaware River in Milford, where he and his wife, Roni, like to observe nature and wildlife. "It's my 'querencia,' the place where my soul longs to rest," he says, explaining the meaning of the Spanish word.

He and Roni and their two daughters, Kendra, a Penn State graduate and elementary school teacher, and Rachel, a student at the University of Maryland, also enjoy the beach, especially the Outer Banks. Even there, however, his occupation follows him and his expertise may be called into use. Griffiths calls it an "occupational hazard" that he is so accustomed to watching people in the water that he is sometimes needed to make water rescues on vacation. "I almost always end up scooping someone out of the rip current," he says. "Once a lifeguard, always a lifeguard!"

With water never far from his mind, he will always be thinking of ways to improve its safety. "My job is my vacation, hobby — my passion," he says. ■