



Sisters Find Second Home at West County Aquatic Center

For sisters Annie and Tori Passyn, the West County Aquatic Center has become much more than a place to swim.

What started as evenings spent practicing with the Charleston County Parks' West County Wahoos swim team has grown into summer jobs, lifelong friendships and valuable life skills.

This year, 17-year-old Annie is serving as a lifeguard while 14-year-old Tori works as a park attendant, giving back to the same facility that helped shape their last three summers.

The journey started with Tori.

"My family takes this week long vacation down in Florida with my mom's family and I was still really bad at swimming and my mom was concerned. So she said this is the year you're going to do swim team so I don't have to worry about you on vacation," she said.

After Tori joined the Wahoos, Annie followed the next year. Through practices and meets, both sisters quickly discovered that the program was about much more than

competition. Tori steadily improved her technique with the help of coaches and teammates alike.

“I get all sorts of help on my diving, my strokes and my flip turns,” she said. “I could ask a coach, but I can also ask a teammate for help every single time. I’ve learned to do a flip turn well and my freestyle is much better. I couldn’t do that without standing up or coughing for much of my first year.”

The West County Wahoos provide young swimmers with opportunities to build confidence, improve their skills and experience the camaraderie that comes with being part of a team.

For Annie, that sense of community has always stood out the most.

“The community is definitely my favorite part of the Wahoos,” she said. “It’s really nice to spend time around people who aren’t part of my normal school community.”

She also credits the team with teaching her how to swim competitively, including mastering the butterfly stroke and learning the finer points that go far beyond recreational swimming.

As they spent more time at the aquatic center, both sisters began to notice something else: the Charleston County Parks staff.

“We would have staff at our home meets and they would actively come out and cheer and knew everyone’s names so that was what kind of first got me thinking about a job here,” Tori said.

Annie had heard positive experiences from friends who already worked for Charleston County Parks and knew it was something she wanted to pursue.

“I’d heard a lot of good things from my friends at school about working for the county parks, and so I knew I wanted to do that,” she said. “I was really excited to take on that kind of responsibility too.”

For Annie, becoming a lifeguard also aligned with her future career interests.

“For me, looking at the training and being like, ‘Oh look, the CPR certification,’ which is something I wanted, the rescue certification, all those things were things I was super excited to learn about because I’ve spent so much time preparing for my future, looking at the medical field. To get that opportunity to learn all those first aid skills was also super important to me.”

Today, Annie and Tori are helping create the same welcoming environment that inspired them years ago. Whether Annie is keeping swimmers safe from the lifeguard

stand or Tori is greeting guests as they enter the park, both are continuing the cycle of encouragement they've experienced as Wahoos.

"I'm definitely not the best swimmer on the team," Annie said. "But I came back and swam again this year because I had so much fun the year before."