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Blue-Mindfulness Training: A Story of Restorative Justice Decolonizing and Re-indigenizing Communal Relationships with Water

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Abstract

This article aims to introduce and describe the development of the concept of Blue-Mindfulness Training™, which was created and designed by Thaddeus Gamory and supported by research and the experience of other experts in the field. Drawing from the author's and others' practical experience, the authors present a "Voice from the Field" perspective on creating and developing the Blue-Mindfulness™. This Instructional Framework, coined by Mr. Thaddeus Gamory Blue-Mindfulness™, addresses the impacts of historical racial discrimination and trauma in BIPOC communities, specifically on marginalized African American communities while promoting a communal and safe relationship with the water. By promoting a positive and safe relationship with water, the authors hope to encourage these communities to embrace the benefits of water as a source of healing and well-being while promoting, educating, and supporting water safety education and drowning prevention.

Keywords: Blue-Mindfulness Training™, water safety, drowning prevention, social justice, historical racial discrimination, BIPOC communities, drowning prevention, learn to swim

Introduction

This paper aims to share the "water birth" of the concept of Blue-Mindfulness Training™ by creator and first author Thaddeus Gamory. This paper's authors describe the development process that took place in the context of a South Florida community towards introducing water as a medicine-based model through a social justice lens. A source of inspiration was the science of the Blue Mind (Nichols, 2014); Blue Mindfulness was created out of the primary author's practical experience with colleagues and community members over years of the following six phases of rediscovery, recovery, mourning, dreaming, commitment, and action. Over the years, the Blue-Mindfulness™ concept was further influenced by various instructors and practitioners of Yoga, Tai-Chi, Qigong, Pilates, Free Diving, Scuba Diving, Deep Water Running, Aquatic Rehabilitation, Underwater Mediation, Chi-running, USA Swimming, USA Triathlon, US Masters Swimming training, and educational material.

Working with experts from the field of aquatics, the article highlights the individual and collective process of decolonizing, re-indigenizing, and restoring ancient mindfulness and water culture practices with each other and water culminating in a restorative land and aquatics approach to healing ourselves and each other near and in safe water places and spaces. This article's authors are hopeful that the aquatic industry will make more significant strides toward eliminating the racial disparity in drowning rates and swimming ability by adopting this framework, which is historically accurate, trauma-informed, and restores the

physical, emotional, and mental ability to learn to swim programming as a way to reestablish an aquatic culture (Dawson, 2018; Beale, 2020) in BIPOC communities.

The Foundation of Blue-Mindfulness Training™

One of the original inspirations for Blue-Mindfulness Training™ was the Holistic Health Educator approach that Gamory began developing after completing certification training at Hippocrates Health Institute in West Palm Beach, Florida, in 2004 during his healing journey after serving as a New York City Police Lieutenant. As stated by Meyerhefer, and colleagues (2022), mindfulness has parallels to indigenous cultural practices. Through this concept, along with guiding and practicing a collection of healing/meditation modalities, the primary author started to add it to water, from very hot to very cold and in between. Gamory's aquatic training for sports and wellness courses taken under Dr. Jane Katz at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in the late 1980s helped him to further engage in and believe in "water as medicine." It wasn't until decades later that Gamory went to the Blue Mind Summit in 2018 in Miami where he met Dr. Wallace Jay Nichols and became further informed about the science of the Blue Mind, which wholeheartedly describes a "Water as Medicine" approach (Nichols, 2014). In 2018 and again in 2020, Gamory was introduced to Mindful Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) Training by Knellee Bisram, Founder of the Academy of Heart and Mind (AHAM) Education and MBSR Instructor/Trainer and Co-Chair of the Broward Mind Body Resiliency Coalition, and Co-Founder Sunday Community of Practice Beach Mediation. He learned that mindfulness practices not only empower communities to take ownership of their health but also show flexibility regarding varying cultural and communal needs (Meyerhefer et al., 2022). These and a collection of other events helped to establish the following baseline in the creation of the Blue-Mindfulness™ approach by understanding the following, as expressed by Jay Nichols (2014):

1. *Water has a powerful and positive effect on our brains and bodies.*
2. *Being near water can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression.*
3. *Water can promote physical health, such as improved cardiovascular and immune system function.*
4. *Spending time in water can foster social connections and promote a sense of community.*
5. *Engaging with water can inspire creativity and a sense of awe and wonder.*

The understanding of one's relationship with water through this concept helped to show how one can use water as a tool for reducing stress and anxiety and fostering a more profound sense of connection with nature and community (Nichols, 2014). Just as the Blue Zones have been designated for their power of longevity (Buettner, 2012), a Blue Mind (Nichols, 2014) creates an opportunity to utilize the power to heal. In addition, when people consistently incorporate Mindfulness, their

neuronal networks have an opportunity for re-wiring and neuroplasticity (Doinova, 2022.).

The practice of Blue Mind, as developed by Jay Nichols and Mindfulness, is highly underutilized in BIPOC communities despite its potential health benefits (Biggers et al., 2020). Coupled with the historical impacts of racialized policies, practices, and trauma on Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), Lynch (2021) stated that these policies had created a cultural disconnection and an inability to fully access and benefit from water, including having safe water access. Blue-Mindfulness™ illuminates the opportunity for healing through practitioner-based activities.

Historical Context and the Need for Blue-Mindfulness™

Many BIPOC communities, especially African American communities in the United States, have been impacted by structural racism since slavery and continue to experience trauma because of health disparities, economic disadvantages, and segregation (Scott-Jones, G., CAADC, Kamara, M. R., & PE, 2020). The need to create a trauma-informed, culturally competent, and historically accurate approach towards providing water safety education, learning to swim, and aquatic development is apparent. Globally, drowning is a "neglected public health threat (World Health Organization [WHO]a, 2014; World Health Organization [WHO]b, 2017). Drowning can happen anywhere and to anyone, especially when engaging water is unexpected. Among unintentional injury-related deaths, fatal drowning is the leading cause of death for children 1-4 and the second leading cause of unintentional injury death for children 5-14 (Clemons, Moreland, and Lee, 2021). Drowning is a public health issue that mirrors other health disparities. Drowning is the second leading cause of unintentional injury death (CDC, 2023), disproportionately affecting African American, Hispanic, Latinx, and Native-American communities. Specifically, the drowning rate has jumped exponentially in Florida, a coastal state. The factors affecting this disparity are diverse, complex, evolving, and interdependent (Lynch, 2021).

Mourning: Generational Trauma and Epigenetic Changes Expressed as Fear and Anxiety

In order to understand why most swimmers, recreationally and competitively, are white, we need to look back at the historical record and context of racialized trauma experienced by African Americans about living in a white-dominated water culture as they were being systematically and structurally excluded. If you wanted to go to the beach and were Black, you either had to risk being beaten and/or arrested. At the time, no public beaches were available to Blacks in Miami-Dade County. As was the scenario in other parts of the country, in Miami (Miayami- native word

meaning *big water*), a group of NAACP activists made history. On May 9, 1945, civil rights activists composed of five men and two women went in the water on the whites-only Baker's Haulover Beach in Dade County, Florida (Peterman, 2021), while attorney, Lawson Thomas, remained on the shore with bail money in his pocket for anticipated arrests. Embarrassed and unwilling to make a scene by arresting the protesters, city officials responded to the issue by designating Virginia Key Beach Park, as seen in Photo 1, as a Dade County Park for the exclusive use of Negroes.

Photo 1

Example of segregated beaches in Florida's Dade County



(Miami Times, 2021)

During the Jim Crow and Civil Rights era, there were numerous instances of segregation in beaches, pools, and other areas. Many of these segregated areas for African American communities, such as Virginia Key Beach, were either inaccessible or situated in locations susceptible to sewage and unsafe swimming conditions. In addition, protests and Wade-Ins throughout the country demanding equal access to safe swimming areas, including public beaches and pools, carried the fear of facing police or violent mobs armed with weapons, as well as the risk of being arrested (Peterman, 2021). This illustrates that despite these areas being open to the public, the trauma experienced by African American communities has hindered their access to these areas. This incident at Virginia Beach in South Florida is just one example of such protests.

The Need for BlueMindfulness™

Water safety and drowning prevention efforts often highlight disparities and use a deficit-based approach to address them. However, there needs to be more attention paid to examining the systematic mechanisms and programs that have contributed to these disparities in aquatic activities. This issue needs to develop more effective strategies for promoting water safety and drowning prevention, particularly for marginalized communities. (Lynch, 2021). The science of Epigenetics has revealed evidence that trauma is passed down from generation to generation. While actual gene sequencing does not change, functional changes are expressed in several psychiatric dysfunctions (Youssef et al., 2022). The expression of fear and anxiety has stamped into the expression and relationship that BIPOC have with the water unless they are given the proper outlets of expression, coaching, and support to be with each other around and in the water.

In February 2007, Lee Pitts and Bruce Wigo co-presented the "Black Splash" at the International Swimming Hall of Fame titled, "The Amazing History of Swimming in Black and White," which inspired a shift in paradigm about the history and who are water people. Their article, along with research from Kevin Dawson, looked at the history of African Americans' relationship to water before and after the transatlantic slave trade and its impact specifically on African American communities. The article highlighted the practices, policies, and influence of structural racism on the trauma inflicted on Black Americans in aquatics (Lee, 2007; Lynch, 2021). This presentation was important as it influenced an approach in aquatics for creating a culturally competent and anxiety-centered approach towards aquatics and learning to swim by understanding. Professionals also influenced the primary author in the field of aquatics, such as Lt. Ken Roland, Arthur Lopez, Dr. Miriam Lynch, Dr. Angela Beale-Tawfeeq, Gerrard Smith (scuba instructor), Maui Goodbeer-Street, Waves founder, and their culturally competent coaching styles to increasing water competency in Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities. These cultural styles of engaging BIPOC communities in aquatics and research in the field towards understanding the disparities in aquatics by Black aquatic professionals helped to create a new narrative towards understanding the disparities on all levels, whether it be drowning practices, participation, and even leadership in aquatics. In his dissertation, Dr. Anderson highlighted the cycle which has led to the high drowning disparities between members of the African American community and European Americans. As identified by Dr. Anderson (2018),

- History and historical barriers have influenced the lack of aquatic traditions
- Lack of aquatic traditions in Black culture has led to fewer connections with the water & fewer aquatic skills
- Possession of fewer aquatic skills has meant fewer role models
- The lack of role models has created myths and inequitable social norms

- Myths and social norms are seen in present-day behaviors being recycled

Anderson's work led to Gamory being invited to co-present at the South Florida Water Safety Symposium in February 2018. Dr. Shaun Anderson, and primary author, Thaddeus Gamory, conducted a workshop based on Anderson's dissertation paper: "Diversity in Aquatics (DIA): African American Aquatic Professionals' Perspectives" (Anderson, 2018). This was bolstered by training from The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond (PISB) "Undoing Racism" and the Racial Equity Institute's, "The GroundWater Approach," towards helping communities understand trauma and its barriers that have influenced aquatics in BIPOC communities. Gamory and Anderson also collaborated with the L.A. Lee YMCA in the Historical Black Community of Sistrunk Fort Lauderdale to host their first "Undoing Racism in Aquatics' workshop with Dr. Kimberly Richardson and Annie Rodriguez of PISB in October 2018 to highlight the historical impact of racialized policies and practices leading to disparities we see in aquatics today (Anderson, 2019; Lynch, 2021). These influences highlighted a need to create a trauma-informed, culturally competent, and historically accurate approach toward providing and transforming the learn-to-swim and aquatic development experience in BIPOC communities.

Action Needed: Spreading Blue-Mindfulness Training

"I have a vision for how we must live and learn together in our multiracial and culturally diverse society and how we can prosper together." Regina Seabrook (July, 2022)

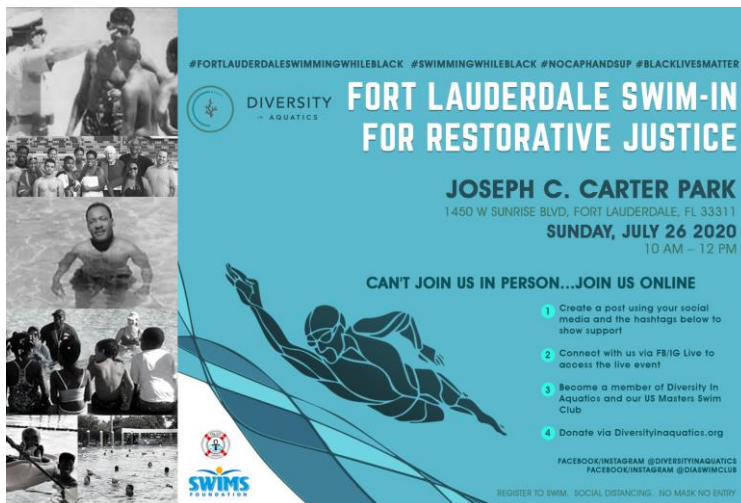
The local research provides an evidence-based approach and foundation for adopting the Blue Mindfulness approach. The goal of the approach is to provide individuals, families, and communities with a positive experience and transform their relationship with water, overcome their traumas, fears, and anxieties, and restore their body, mind, and spirit.

A powerful example of a culturally competent trauma-informed restorative justice-focused event was organized when DIA Masters Swim & Triathlon Club members, Ghenette "G" Wright Muir and her adult son Masi Muir were swimming at the Historic Black Carter/Sunland Park pool in the Sistrunk neighborhood of Fort Lauderdale, July 2020. Friend and DIA Swim Club member Niki Lopez later joined them. This was during the height of the Covid Pandemic and Social Justice Movement following the death of George Floyd at the hands of police officers. It was when a white woman swimming objected to their talking, demanding that pool staff call the police in contradiction to pool policy. The staff deferred to the white woman, the police arrived, and all three peaceful black swimmers were expelled from the pool and threatened with arrest if they returned. The white woman

continued to swim and refused to leave the pool until she was ready; in defiance of the police order, she left as well. If not for the community organizing that followed, there would have been no action taken to right this wrong. The white swimmer was ultimately barred from returning to the pool, and the City of Fort Lauderdale agreed to support the Swim-In-For Joy and Social Justice Annual event. The community chose to engage in a healing event that would begin the repair and restoration needed to return to a state of safety, joy, and belonging in water.

Figures 1 and 2

Figures 1 and 2 show images of posters created for the event.



(Ghenete “G” Wright Muir, 2020)

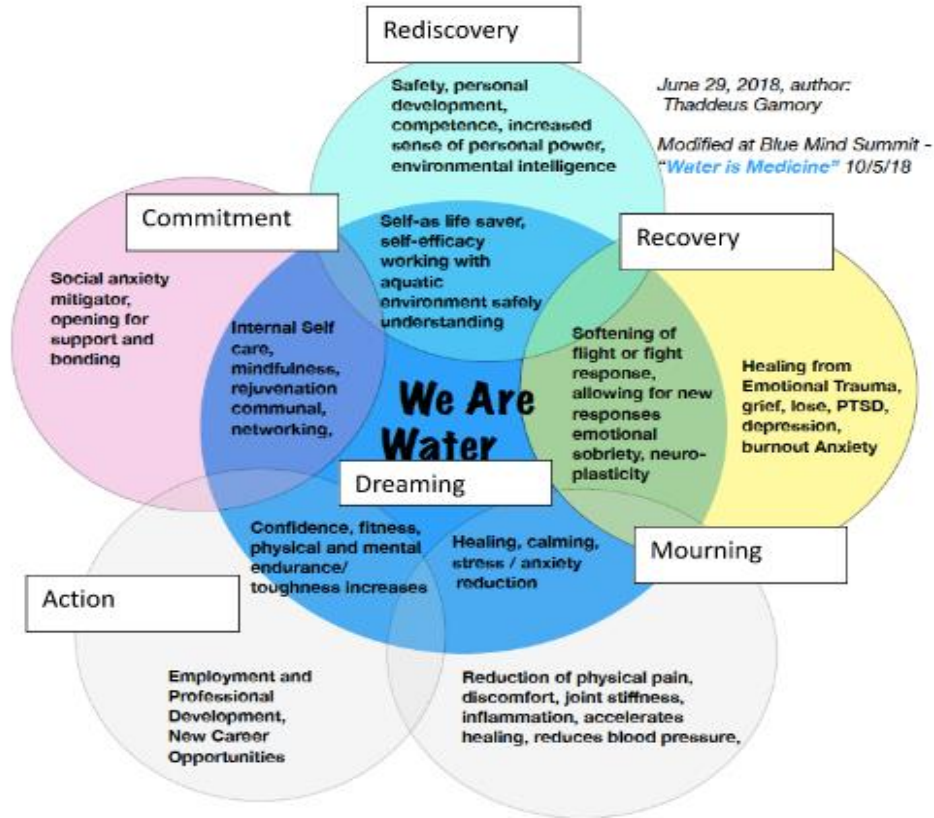
Defining “We Are Water”

Gamory presented the “We Are Water” venn diagram slide (see Figure 3) alongside the American Red Cross-National Water Safety Leadership team to members of the

National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives (NOBLE) during their annual Training Conference.

Figure 3

Water as Medicine Model (overlapped with six phases of decolonizing and re-indigenizing for restorative justice)



(Thaddeus Gamory, 2018)

The presentation with the Red Cross at NOBLE coincided with Gamory completing the Center for Mind-Body Medicine (CMBM) Advanced Training Program and Gamory attending the Blue Mind Summit 2018 Miami. This all led to conversations Gamory had with *Blue Mind* author Dr. Nichols and with permission, the title and brand combining Mindfulness and blue mind research, "birthed" the Blue-Mindfulness™ Training brand based on the primary author's practical experience with colleagues and community members over years of the following six phases of rediscovery, recovery, mourning, dreaming, commitment, and action. In the spirit of our indigenous ancestors, the water as medicine model depicted below in Figure 1 allows for a circular maze-like, nonlinear, and iterative process. For practical purposes of sharing this story, we will present them in a sequential manner to organize the experiential nature of this process.

Rediscovery: Water, Breath, & Movement

"I had never made such a profound connection between the practice of mindfulness, my experience of being in relationship with water, and my experiences of joy" (Regina Seabrook testimonial, from June 26, 2022, Broward Community of Practice at The Mizell/Johnson State Park & Historic Black Beach.)

As voices from the field, we have rediscovered and verbally expressed in mindfulness circles the legacy of the indigenous people who inhabited the land we reside on as the first step we take when we gather as the Broward Mindfulness Community of Practice (COP). Southeast Florida's indigenous people are the Seminole/Miccosukee, Taino, and Tequesta peoples. The Miccosukee word for water, "*okay*," should remind us that we are first, mostly water: our bodies are approximately 60% water, and our brains are 80% water (Water Science School, 2019), and second, we are *okay*. In an assembly of First Nations, water was honored with this statement:

Water is the most life-sustaining gift on Mother Earth and is the interconnection among all living beings. Water sustains us, flows between us, within us, and replenishes us. Water is the blood of Mother Earth and, as such, cleanses not only herself but all living things. Water comes in many forms, and all are needed for Mother Earth's health and our health. The sacred water element teaches us that we can have great strength to transform even the tallest mountain while being soft, pliable, and flexible. Water gives us the spiritual teaching that we, too, flow into the Great Ocean at the end of our life journey. Water shapes the land and gives us the great gifts of rivers, lakes, ice, and oceans. Water is the home of many living things that contribute to the health and wellness of everything not in the water (Turner, 2012).

Dreaming: Healing Ourselves and Each Other Near, In and Under Water

“While floating on my back, I was reminded of a moment of spontaneous joy”
(Regina Seabrook, Minnesota Fitness Swimmer/Educator and Blue-Mindfulness Experience Participant, personal communication, 2022)

Dreaming starts in the creative mind with deep breathing. In Broward County, two local black community leaders, Dr. Von D. Mizell and Ms. Eula Johnson Clark, mobilized others to participate in "wade-ins." These wade-ins were conducted to obtain access to the beach after being relegated to a few segregated pools (they had no access to the beach for 8 years after the closing of the "Galt Mile Negro beach" for the building of "whites only" condominiums). The current-day state park in Dania Beach, Florida, is named after them and was the historically black beach. The Von D. Mizell and Eula Johnson State Park is the site for the current Broward Mindfulness Community of Practice (COP), where both land and water meditations take place on a regular basis. This location was mindfully and intentionally chosen to continue the advocacy and legacy of the civil rights leaders who worked to create access and safe spaces for Black people to exist and thrive on the beach.

Commitment: Creating a Safe Water Culture

The recent drowning incident in a lake at a Miami-Dade park where two teen black twins drowned and died (WPLG, 2023) is a present moment reminder of how essential both mindfulness and competency to swim are to everyday activities, especially in a place where there are many waterways. Given the disparity and the opportunity, we, as authors of these voices from the field, are committed to a blue mindfulness paradigm. We share this commitment with our local, national, and international communities that honor and promote swimming competency and invite all DIA members and communities to adopt a practice of Mindfulness prior to entering the water. We commit to training teens, adults, military veterans, educators, medical workers, and first responders to adopt a blue mindfulness philosophy.

Researchers in South Florida have already demonstrated a commitment to examining the perceptions and experiences of BIPOC living in this coastal region. The researchers have currently noted that BIPOC residents, predominantly African American, report limited engagement with their beaches (Phoenix et al., 2020). Data analysis from further investigation with focus group participants revealed that access and comprehension may be affected by historical racial segregation, socioeconomic limitations and cultural and generational differences, perceived threats, and lack of outreach (Hollenbeck et al., 2014). These findings validate the need for commitment to greater awareness, education, and outreach in under-resourced BIPOC communities offering safe and affordable water access options.

The Development of Blue-Mindfulness Training™

“The tears shed are a process of healing water and the mourning must be acknowledged for the joy to follow.” (Broward COP facilitator A. Udaya Thomas on June 26, 2022)

With properly trained facilitators and swim instructors, Blue-Mindfulness Training™ may address the root causes of fear and anxiety around the water, and generational trauma, and provide safe spaces to be near and in the water. While it is a process of respiratory impairment, the response of our nervous system depends on a person's capacity to swim, level of anxiety, and reactions. Our nervous system comprises both the central and peripheral nervous systems (CNS and PNS). The autonomic nervous system (ANS) resides in both the CNS and the PNS and has two divisions: the sympathetic nervous system (SNS), which we know as the "fight or flight" responses, and the parasympathetic nervous system (PSNS), which we know as the "rest and digest" responses (MindBody Medicine Institute, 2022). While we need both, prolonged stimulation of the SNS results in chronic stress and fatigue, and if not balanced with PSNS stimulation, the results could be fatal in relation to water and water safety (MindBody Medicine Institute, 2022). The goal for the body to work at optimal condition is brief periods of fight or flight to mobilize energy stores to prepare the body to take action accompanied by prolonged periods of conserving energy and the body's resources.

Breathe

Native cultures have known the power of breath and its connectedness to healing practices. While we have no control over most of our body's organs, we do have control over the breath which can influence our heart rate, blood pressure, circulation, and movement. Conscious and mindful breathing builds the capacity for breathing underwater as well as coordinating breath and movement on land and in water residing mostly in a relaxed state. Slow, purposeful diaphragmatic breathing activates the PSNS, which in turn provides a sense of calm and relaxation (MindBody Medicine Institute, 2022). Staying calm in the water is essential to maintaining proper lung capacity and coordinated movement. Indigenous peoples cultivated numerous breathing practices and sound that we can make to release stress and trauma from the past and the present.

Movement

Movement is the third component of rediscovery. Our bodies were made to move. Moving both the breath and our limbs first on land prepares us to be more focused and calmer when we move in the water. This land practice also gives the community a chance to debrief, connect and share the practice of breathwork and mindful movement together. Once in the water, this may result in being more mindful of space and place while swimming together in a shared water place like a swimming pool, lake or ocean. Silent peace walks have been incorporated in our practices as another way to honor the ancestors that walked on the very same land and in the same waters. Also, in the spirit of the indigenous peoples, the circle is always open, allowing anyone to move in or out of the circle.

Recovery

“Let the hopeful healing waters flow cleansing all pain and fear, all hurt and regret” (Buffalo N.Y. Poet Laureate, personal communication, 2022)

In order to recover this water connection, we have recognized that a missing element in the modern water safety and learn-to-swim industries is a cultural connection, as illuminated by the aforementioned water honoring statement, as well as in the 2019 documentary film "Wade in The Water: Drowning in Racism ."This Emmy award-winning Impact film, written and directed by Cathleen Dean, provides audiences with an authentic foundation of African American history and culture that is not only relevant but also necessary in today's society and has contributed to the increase of awareness and embracing the fact that we are water people, even if the cultural awareness is currently dormant.

Conclusion

Re-connecting BIPOC communities to their historical traditions and practices in water as essential to life and healing may promote a greater desire to become water competent. Prefaced with Mindfulness and safety, BIPOC may experience this immersion in water with others which may lead to making a deeper connection to water. Anecdotal proclamations shared throughout this "voices from the field" article from BIPOC in the community led the first author (mindfulness leader and swim coach Thaddeus Gamory) to create local traditions and practices of Blue Mindfulness for self and community care in Broward County, Florida.

The authors of this article are hopeful that the aquatic industry will make bigger strides toward eliminating the racial disparity in drowning rates and swimming ability, by adopting this framework, which is historically accurate, trauma-informed, and restores the physical, emotional, and mental ability to learning to swim programming as a way to reestablish an aquatic culture (Dawson, 2018; Beale, 2020) in BIPOC communities.

We recognize that the researchers' contributions, Diversity in Aquatics leadership, developers of the Center for Mind-Body Medicine Mind-Body Skills Curriculum, the wisdom of indigenous practices, and the enthusiasm of local BIPOC participants and white allies have led to the development of the Blue-Mindfulness™ paradigm. In the spirit of our ancestors, our vision is to keep the circle open, go with the flow, and expand the number of competent and mindful swimmers. We hope that reading these voices from the field couched in these 6 phases of decolonizing and re-indigenizing as a framework for moving towards transformation and restorative justice has inspired you to learn more and join the movement.

Photo 2

Diversity In Aquatics Masters Practice



Thaddeus Gamory, 2022

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