

Dawson Walters, SSTY

My name is Dawson Walters and swimming has been a constant in my life for as long as I can remember. The YMCA has provided much more than just a place to swim, it has provided a blueprint for the man I want to become. Between the elite competitive environment of the Schroeder YMCA and my professional responsibilities as a lifeguard at the Kettle Moraine YMCA, my life has been shaped by the values of discipline, community, and social responsibility. Being a member of a YMCA swim team isn't just about the time on the scoreboard, it's about the character built at the program.

My journey with the Schroeder YMCA has possibly been the greatest experience of my life. I joined Schroeder just over a year ago now and I can confidently say it was the best choice I could have made. Over the past year I have been surrounded by the very best teammates I could ask for who push me constantly to not only to be a better swimmer but a better person. Competing at such a high level requires a level of grit that is unique to the sport of swimming. Over the years, this dedication has allowed me to become a USA Swimming State Record Holder and an All-American Swimmer. The YMCA taught me that it isn't just about winning races; it's about being a teammate who upholds Schroeder's core values of "Be Great, Expect Success, Act With Integrity, and Team First".

The impact of the YMCA deepened when I transitioned from the pool to the lifeguard stand. Serving as a lifeguard at the Kettle Moraine YMCA for the past nine months has shifted my perspective on what it means to be part of a community. I am responsible for the safety of every child and family in the water. This role has taught me the importance of vigilance and responsibility, lessons that will impact me for the rest of my life.

These experiences have directly influenced my career aspirations. As I prepare to attend the University of Minnesota to study Sociology of Law, Criminology, and Justice, I carry the YMCA's values with me. My goal is to eventually become a federal agent for the FBI, a role that requires the same balance of physical discipline and community mindfulness that I practiced at the YMCA

The YMCA has truly been my second home, a place that challenged me to break records while reminding me to remain humble. It has prepared me for the rigors of a Big Ten University and a career in public service. I am grateful for the large part the YMCA played in shaping me to become the person I am today and the person I intend to become in the future.

Jacob Faust, SPDY

When I joined the YMCA, little did I know just how much of an influence it would have on my life. When I was a toddler I hated the water so much I had to be pulled into the pool. My mom knew the importance of and valued me knowing how to swim so she worked behind-the-scenes with the Y swim coordinator so I would no longer freak out and made sure I learned the basics of how to swim. I never enjoyed the lessons until I had this outstanding instructor. He told me I could keep swimming year-round at the Y and my answer was “YES!” I’m in my eleventh season swimming competitively with SPDY and love it so much I plan to continue swimming in college.

I have learned the value of having a role model and also the importance of being a role model. When I had just started swimming, I would think the older kids were fast and cool (they were), so them coming up and talking to me, and actually knowing my name was legendary. The person I looked up to most was Drew Harris. I would stay after practice to watch him swim and often convinced my parents we needed to stay hours after I was done competing at meets just so I could watch Drew swim. I wanted to be just like him. Now that I am that big kid I make a point of talking to the little kids. I make an effort to go into practice early to help coach the littles, hoping to have the same impact on them as Drew had on me. Without the YMCA swim team, I would not have had the positive interactions I did with Drew and most definitely there would not have been the lasting impacts.

YMCA swimming has helped me learn the value of hard work, dedication, and perseverance. Through my swimming career, I have seen my fair share of injuries: a broken arm and two toes, two abdominal surgeries, and two bone bruises that required a walking boot. I was unable to swim due to an appendectomy, that took me out for six weeks in mid-October 2024. Then I broke two toes with what should have been a “fun” New Years Day practice. These injuries challenged me as I needed to relearn basic skills like a start and flip turn.

I have always set my goals high and this past year, I wanted to qualify individually for Y Nationals. However that goal seemed unattainable after my broken toes. My coach knew differently. He gave a gentle nudge that was just what I needed for me to push myself. I dug deep, worked hard and qualified in the 100 Back for Y Nationals. While at the GAC, I added the 200 back and 100 breast qualifying times, thus securing my Y Nationals spot for 2026. From this past year I was able to learn the importance of hard work, dedication, and perseverance and see the positive short-term and long-term effects. I was able to believe in myself and achieve a goal by just putting my head down and pushing through when things got tough.

The hard work, dedication and perseverance that I have learned will definitely help me as I continue swimming collegiately at Valparaiso University. Furthermore pursuing a Physician Assistant degree and going on to specialize in the allergy field will require these same skills. I am grateful for my SPDY swim team experience and the effect it has had on my life.

Lindsey Hohnl, SEA

If I hadn't started swimming, I couldn't imagine how different my life would be. I joined my swim team in fourth grade. It was the first sport or activity that I truly cared about and chose for myself. From the beginning, I loved the drive I felt in the water, and my teammates and coaches who pushed me to improve.

In eighth grade, when it came time to consider high schools, my parents and I assumed I would attend my grade school's recommended high school, where I could grow in my faith. But they didn't have a swim team or a place for me to swim. My dad and I spent countless nights researching and emailing coaches at different schools in the area, only to be rejected each time due to WIAA regulations. I even tried talking to our athletic director into starting a team where I would coach myself and anyone else interested, just to get the opportunity to swim in high school. Eventually, I stopped pursuing high school and decided to continue swimming club year-round.

Because of my situation, if my area didn't have a YMCA club swim team, I would have never had the opportunity to swim, the sport that shaped who I am. Through swimming, I have met some of my closest friends and gained confidence in myself. But, even though I owe so much of who I am to swimming, it wasn't always perfect.

During my junior year, I struggled in nearly every aspect of my life. I overloaded my schedule with AP classes and pushed myself to maintain high grades. In doing so, I burned out. Practices became harder to attend, and even when I showed up, I didn't feel like myself. I felt disconnected from the people around me despite their encouragement. I succeeded academically, but it cost me my state cuts and the results I hoped for. I felt like a failure, not just because of my times, but because I believed I had let everyone down.

During this time, I considered quitting more than once. I was exhausted and afraid that others saw me as unmotivated or incapable. But ultimately, my teammates noticing my failures is what caused me to keep trying. Their willingness to welcome me back every day reminded me that I still belonged.

This season, rebuilding has required more mental strength than physical endurance. Now, every practice I attend, I have to challenge the narrative I created in my own mind that my success was in the past. Some days, progress looks like getting back down to old times. Other days, it looks like showing up despite fear of failing again. Either way, I leave stronger and more connected than when I arrived.

Swimming has taught me resilience, but more importantly, it has taught me empathy. When I was struggling, my best effort on some days was simply showing up. I learned that support matters more than judgment and that some struggles can't be seen or easily comprehended. That perspective will stay with me as I pursue a degree and career in nursing. I hope to meet patients where they are, not where they are expected to be, just as my teammates did during my hardest season.

I am deeply grateful for SEA, my teammates, and especially my coach for believing in me when I struggled to believe in myself. Swimming has shaped me far more than just physically. The resilience and empathy I found in the water will guide me far beyond the pool and into the person I hope to become.

Nathaniel Foster, SEA

My name is Nathaniel Foster, and I have been a member of the Racine YMCA swim team SEA (Southeastern Aquatics) for over 10 years, since 2015. Being a part of the YMCA swim team has impacted my life so much and has been a blessing for me. To learn water safety my parents put me into swimming lessons at the YMCA here in Racine, WI when I was four. After four years of lessons one of my YMCA instructors recommended me to join their YMCA team SEA. When I went to tryout, I was a little nervous and was placed into Silver the second level of four: Bronze, Silver, Gold, Seniors. After I had been on the team for about a month, I had my first swim meet. I can still remember the loud whistles and cheering from all the kids on deck. I felt so welcome and the level of inclusivity, despite being so new to the team, was my first glimpse of being on a YMCA team. That first year had been so fun and memorable, I even made it to State in the 25 Butterfly. However, my 2<sup>nd</sup> year was probably the most impactful. I had just moved up to the next level, Gold, and had to swim at a different time and with a lot of older kids. One of the boys I had watched do tryouts had been put into my level and even into my lane. Ever since, Brady and I have had a healthy, competitive friendship. Sometime the same year, Jack joined the team and became part of our friend group. As the years went by, our friendships grew and so did our team. I am beyond grateful when I say Brady, Jack and Nathan are my three best friends, all from Team SEA.

During my sophomore year in HS my connection to SEA became even stronger when I was offered a part-time job to help coach the younger kids in Bronze. Not only have I been able to help develop the next generation of our youth, but also to embody social responsibility just as the YMCA Mission encourages. Being a Senior level swimmer, while coaching our Bronze youth has been beyond rewarding. I am respectful yet honest when coaching and care deeply about the success of my peers and the kids I coach. Additionally, Coach Neil Wright has fostered my level of responsibility ever since I was eight and I am confident that my integrity and levels of responsibility shine through my actions as Senior swimmer and Bronze coach. Helping my peers and especially my Bronze swimmers thrive in body, mind, and spirit makes me feel empowered to further strengthen our YMCA swim community and make the next generation of swimmers feel as included as I was let to feel when I first joined SEA.

As I reflect on it all in my final months of being part of this team, I am simply grateful for how SEA shaped me. I truly believe the relationships and friendships that I have gained from my time on the team will last my entire life. It has shaped me into a person I feel I can be proud of, SEA taught me so much about myself. SEA has taught me how to be resilient, how to accept failure, humility, honesty, and how to lead others. If I could go back and do it again, I would in a heartbeat. Aside from my parents' SEA has made the biggest impact in my life thus far.

Sophia Marini, SEA

Most people see swimming as an individual sport: one person against their own personal times. However, I've learned that my team is what pushes me to find strength and success both in and out of the water. I have been swimming with South Eastern Aquatics-YMCA since I was 7 years old, and in those 11 years of swimming, it's safe to say that I have found so much more than a favorite stroke or event. I have found inspiring coaches, a group of teammates that truly feel like family, and a lifelong passion for the sport of swimming.

My commitment in the pool has not always had a linear progression, and I would find myself overwhelmed with balancing extremely rigorous and demanding coursework on top of my swimming goals. I would feel disappointed when I couldn't give swimming the priority due to busy weeks with tests, studying, and due dates. However, the days out of the water made me realize how meaningful my time in the water really is. Even when I wasn't able to be as consistent as I wanted to be, my coaches taught me how to practice with intentionality and make every moment in the water count. I moved past the "all-or-nothing" mindset and realized that I could still grow as a swimmer if I remained strong and determined at practice even during my most demanding weeks. This taught me that being a good teammate is not just about being the fastest, but being focused, present, and uplifting during the moments that matter most.

I decided that if my time at the pool was limited by other obligations, I would make my presence as impactful as possible. As a kid, I always looked up to the older swimmers, who were fast, determined, and always showed kindness to me. Now that I am that older swimmer, I try to be the teammate that I always looked up to when I was younger, and create a deeper sense of community within the team. I make it a priority to be a friend to everyone on the team, whether that is staying late at a meet to count for someone's 500, or high-fiving everyone in the lane next to me after a tough set at practice. Seeing how transformative these connections can be in a team shows me that I want to bring that same sense of collaboration and support into my future endeavors in college.

Reflecting on my time spent with team SEA-Y, I realize that the true takeaway is not about my setbacks, but what I learned about myself that will stick with me throughout my life, especially as I embark on a new journey in college. Even when I couldn't be there every single day, my love for the sport and my team never wavered. I have met some of my best friends through swimming, and they taught me so much about what it means to be a swimmer. They showed me unconditional love and support through every single busy week, doubt, or bad swim. As I embark into a new chapter of my life where I will be doing new things and meeting new people, I feel confident in my ability to handle setbacks and set boundaries and priorities to be successful in every aspect of my life. I will always look back with gratitude for what this team and sport has given me: a home away from home, a second family, a mindset of growth, and a passion that will last a lifetime.

Molly Warren, SEA

Our experiences create the situations that build our character. How we respond to different situations in life is a testament to who we are. They can push us, test us, and help us learn new things about ourselves that we didn't know before. I am so grateful to have experienced being a part of a YMCA swim team. This experience has changed my life in many ways, and helped me to grow as a person, teammate, and friend. Being a part of a YMCA swim team has changed my life through being accepted as I am and fighting performance anxiety through my faith.

Being a member of a YMCA swim team changed my life because it was the first time I truly felt I could be myself. I have always been a quieter person, and as a freshman in high school, I had almost no friends, except on my high school swim team. Two of my teammates convinced me to join the Racine Family YMCA swim team. The moment I stepped on deck, I felt welcome. Although most of the swimmers had been swimming together for many years, they welcomed me. As I got to know more of my teammates, I realized that these were not just friends, these people were family to each other. I began to open up to the swimmers on the team and find my voice. I felt I could truly be myself, and I didn't have to change how I acted to fit in with the team. I learned what it was like to have true friends, and met some of my best friends to this day. The family aspect of the Racine YMCA swim team changed my life and helped me to be authentically myself.

Being a member of a YMCA swim team helped me to overcome performance anxiety through my faith. When I first started swimming at the high school and club level, I was very nervous about racing in meets. Even before practice, I would feel anxious about doing well and being able to keep up. Then, I began to grow in my faith. I felt more comfortable talking with my teammates about my faith, and they shared their experiences with me. Some of my teammates and I started to pray together before our races, and it helped me to calm down. I learned to trust God's plan for me, and that all I can do is my best, no matter the outcome of the race or practice. This not only helped me during swim meets, but with presentations and exams at school. I am so grateful YMCA swim teams support and create a safe space that athletes can express their faith. Being able to grow in my faith and calm my anxiety on a YMCA swim team had a great effect on my life.

Being a part of a YMCA swim team has been one of the most impactful experiences of my life. Finding a new family was something I never expected, and I know that I will keep in touch with many of my teammates and coaches as I move on to this new chapter in my life. As I said before, our experiences make us who we are. If we are lucky enough, an experience can change us for the better. As a swimmer on the Racine Family YMCA team, I am so proud to say I have been changed for the better.

Grace Krukowski, SSTY

I am a competitive swimmer who has turned my passion for swimming into a platform to initiate change in my community, thanks to the YMCA Schroeder Swim team.

When I chose a topic for my sophomore year personal project, I turned to swimming for inspiration. Growing up, the YMCA was more than just a gym or a pool, it was a hub for community, enabling real relationships while physically staying active. While training with Schroeder, I noticed the stark contrast of aquatic access across different zip codes. This observation, sparked by the diverse community that the YMCA serves, led me to my topic, why don't more kids in the heart of Milwaukee have these same opportunities as I have had?

Schroeder's mindset and inclusive culture led me to grow into an initiator, which fostered my decision to be proactive and research why.

My research uncovered that it wasn't due to the lack of interest, rather lack of access. Milwaukee Recreation did not have enough swim instructors to meet the demand for swim lessons. I took action. I became certified as a swim instructor so additional classes could be offered, increasing accessibility for Milwaukee families. Becoming certified as a swim instructor is my way of utilizing my swimming skills and the character that I've built through Schroeder YMCA in order to give back to the community.

This project initiated my passion for community-based wellness and pulled the curtain back on the systemic inequalities of Milwaukee. My YMCA experience is what drives my current career interest—public health and urban development.

If I receive the Coach Jon Brenner YMCA Scholarship, I would love to go Marquette University, as I was offered a spot on the Inaugural Division I Women's Swim Team. I would be so excited to bring my leadership, dedication, and energy to create a lasting impact on the team culture. Since there are limited athletic scholarships, and athletes are ineligible for the standard Pere Marquette merit scholarship, additional financial support is especially important for me. I'd love to fully commit to representing Marquette University and all that it stands for without having to worry about a job while being an athlete or taking out large loans. I will be a founding member of the Marquette swim team, which will allow me to be a part of setting the standard for a high performing team. This opportunity can create a lasting change not just on the Marquette campus, but throughout the Milwaukee community as a whole.

While on the team, I hope to partner with local recreation programs to give back to the neighborhoods surrounding Marquette. I hope to do this by sharing our new pool and to teach community members water safety skills, just as I received from the YMCA when I was younger, and just what Coach Jon would want. Joining my YMCA swim team helped me discover a career path filled with purpose—one that empowers me to make safer and healthier communities.

Will Downend, SSTY

I grew up in a military household so I never really got much of a say in where I was living, I just had to pick up my life and drop it wherever I was told to. This meant that I had to constantly change swim teams as well, leading me to swim on all different kinds of teams, each with a different dynamic. The team that I was swimming on directly before I moved to Wisconsin was considered to be a very “high-performing” or “elite” team, but it never really felt like home. All of that changed when I relocated to Milwaukee and joined Schroeder. I remember walking in the first day of practice and it immediately felt different than before. Everyone wanted to talk to me, they all wanted me to come swim in their lane, even people who were much faster than me or older than me. That would have never happened amidst the cliques of so many teams I had been on before. It was already starting to feel like family.

As the days and practices went by, I began to fall in love with the process more and more. The endless hard practices were wearing, but I knew it was turning me into a better swimmer, and a more disciplined person. Of all the people I’ve met in my life, the coaches and teammates that I’ve met at Schroeder are some of the best and most impactful people in my life. Coach Chandler Lewis specifically has made a huge impact on me. He taught me a lot about swimming for sure, but above all he has always been there for me and believed in me. Coach Chandler helped me tackle a dream that I never thought was going to happen, swimming in college. With his dedication and support, I finally found the right school for me to continue my swimming career. Over time I became more and more involved in the team, and now I even coach a group of my own at Schroeder. This team gives me a sense of purpose, a sense of belonging, and a way for me to help foster the same relationships I wish I’d had sooner with the next generation of swimmers.

With my military background I always heard the phrase, “family is who you make it” a lot, but I never really understood it. Now I do. Over the three years that I’ve been with Schroeder, I’ve gained a lot of things, but most importantly, a true family.

Klare Pilger, SPDY

The SPDY swim team and Stevens Point YMCA affected my life more than just with my swimming ability. I have found a family and community who support me every step of the way, whether it be in the pool or out. Not only have the people around me been of influence, but the dedication and perseverance that I have developed and refined over the past twelve years as a part of my YMCA team, have made me into the person I am today.

The relationships I have formed through the YMCA will continue to impact my life forever. Whether it be the lifelong friendships I have made or the support system around me, I would not be complete without them. Through being a part of the swim team, I have formed many bonds with people that will last a lifetime. I have met my best friends and found my biggest cheerleaders. Through hard workouts and tough lifts, we all encourage and push each other to be our very best. I know that if I had a tough day, the practice ahead of me will always make me better and the laughs I share with my team never fail to brighten my mood. We have fostered an environment within my team to work hard, but never forget how important it is to enjoy yourself at practice. Our small little team has become my home, my safe space, and my family.

There are many life skills that I have developed thanks to being a part of a YMCA swim team. I have learned the value of hard work, why it is important to persevere through pain, and that being uncomfortable is the only way to grow. Seeing hard work, not only in myself, but those around me, pay off at the end of the season is a feeling that you can not describe. That feeling comes from the hours of work we see each other put in whether it be on our best days or our worst days. Being a part of my YMCA team has helped me to always be proud of my work and appreciate the work others put in. While swimming is a relatively individual sport, my team has created a place that connects us all together to celebrate our victories and lift each other up after our losses. Challenging sets, injury, and exhaustion have all pushed me to my limit, but through this team I have been able to grow past my limits and become a person younger me would be proud of.

Through my final year of YMCA swimming, I have been blessed to look around me and see my best friends, closest mentors, and the best support system a girl could dream of. My experience on this team has been one I will forever be grateful for and one I could never forget.

Ashlyn Malzewski, SEA

Growing up, I never liked change. I was a “stick to the schedule” child, and that schedule was strict. Every hour of my day was planned out; when I would wake up, when I would eat, get ready for school, have a snack, do my homework, and countless other details. That structure made me feel safe and in control, but it also made me anxious. Any small disruption felt overwhelming, as if everything was suddenly out of place.

Joining a YMCA swim team changed how I viewed routine. At first, I was nervous about joining a new team because it represented extreme change; new coaches, new teammates, and an unfamiliar practice environment. Letting go of my tightly controlled schedule felt uncomfortable, and at the beginning, I questioned whether I had made the right decision. However, swimming quickly introduced me to a different kind of routine, one that relied on consistency and dedication.

Being a part of Southeastern Aquatics (SEA) YMCA swim team has taught me that routines don't have to be perfectly planned to be effective. Practices happened regularly, but no two days were the same. Sets changed, workouts varied, and meet outcomes were unpredictable. At first, that uncertainty triggered my anxiety, but over time I learned to adapt. I realized that showing up, putting in effort, and trusting my coaches with training mattered more than controlling each detail.

YMCA Swimming also helped me become more comfortable with change. The pool became a space where I learned that I could handle uncertainty and still succeed. When I felt anxious or out of control, I learned how to channel that energy into physical movement. Instead of letting my anxiety spiral in my head, I used it to push harder in the water. Long, exhausting sets gave my nerves an outlet, and races allowed me to turn that anxious energy into a source of strength.

One of the most impactful parts of joining SEA was the people I met. If I had never taken the risk of joining a new team, in a new city, with a new routine, I never would have met the friends who helped me rediscover my love for the sport. Whether we have the hardest practice of the season or a recovery practice, my teammates continue to show their dedication by showing up, motivating each other, and turning the pool deck into a welcoming and supportive environment following the four core values of being a YMCA team. They turned practices into something I constantly looked forward to and reminded me that changing a routine doesn't always result in bad outcomes.

Through YMCA swimming, I learned that routines can be flexible, change can be positive, and anxiety can be turned into a tool. While only being a member for a shorter amount of time, YMCA swimming has undoubtedly affected my life in more ways than one. Without YMCA swimming I don't know if I would still be in the sport. It taught me that growth often comes from discomfort, and that working hard and enjoying the process can co-exist.