

COVID Ice Pops a Lifeline for Helena Swimmer

By Peggy Stringer

Montana's Governor Steve Bullock issued a stay-at-home order to curtail the spread of the COVID -19 on March 28, 2020. The order was in effect for only one month, but to

Helena Ridley Masters it felt like an eternity. Ridleys were not going to take it without swimming, so they donned their wetsuits and headed to the lake. On April 26, eight tough women planned a socially distanced swim around Spring Meadow Lake. Lydia Kuderna pulled out her thermometer said, "water temperature 51 degrees!"



It was a beautiful, warm, blue-sky Montana day with no wind and the resident osprey was watching as the swimmers entered the lake. Peggy Stringer exclaimed, "the water temperature is cold enough to give you an ice cream headache!" But happy to be swimming again, Heather Grahame and Ann Hill named the group, "COVID Ice Pops".

Word about COVID Ice Pops Spreads Through Helena

Lydia Kuderna took the lead, organizing the text messages to all the swimmers interested in swimming outside in open water. The word about COVID Ice Pops spread by word-of-mouth through Helena's swimming community with nineteen swimmers getting text messages regarding time and locations to swim. Passion and enthusiasm for swimming created energy which got swimmers out of bed

before 5:00 am to get to Canyon Ferry Lake by 6:00 am for a swim as the sun rose over the lake. With the glow of sunrise, swimmers enjoyed the camaraderie. Retired Swimmers usually swam later, but everyone swam open water 3 to 4 times a week.



Lydia shared that, “the COVID Ice Pops were a lifeline to me this spring and summer, and even into the fall! I could not have swum open water without my faithful companions! We usually brought food to share in our socially distanced style, and we always enjoyed each other’s company, whether there were 2 or 3 of us, or 10 swimmers, a great time was had by all.”

2020 is proving to be a year of firsts for Kathleen!

Kathleen McElwain spent years watching her daughter Kelsey swim in high School and college, but 2020 was proving to be a year of firsts for Kathleen. She is a skilled runner and cyclist who wanted to do a triathlon and began swimming about four years ago with the encouragement of her friend, Julie Ackerlund. “She has improved so much since the first time she joined the Ridley Master’s workouts. Her discipline, work ethic and determination are apparent at every workout. She gives 110 percent!” said coach Peggy Stringer. At age 59, with the encouragement from her daughter, her coaches, and her teammates, she entered her first swim meet at the **MT LMSC Butte Meet on January 25, 2020**. She had so much fun that she signed up for the **USMS 2020 Montana Masters State Championship** in Bozeman, swam four events and placed first in the grueling 1,650-yard freestyle. Kathleen said “I felt an amazing sense of accomplishment competing in my first swim meet. I enjoy the team atmosphere and encouragement from all my teammates.”

2020 is proving to be a year of firsts for Kathleen. She also signed up with several other Helena Ridley swimmers for Mark Johnston's virtual open water Grand Slam swim series. This new concept incorporated all the standard triathlon distances: Sprint (800M), Olympic (1500M), Half- (1930M) and Full-Distance (3860M). She had never done anything like this before. Now, she was swimming virtually with 211 swimmers from 13 countries and 26 states. Swimming is truly a sport that brings people together. After finishing all the events Lydia said, "Her 2.4-mile swim was the frosting on the cake, what a feat!!!!" "Kathleen shows tremendous grit," said Heather Grahame.

Kathleen shows tremendous grit!

Kathleen felt, "this was my biggest accomplishment, my biggest personal accomplishment. I remember not even being able to swim 25 yards in the pool without stopping. I also must give a big shoutout to Anne Hill and Mackenzie Jones. Ann stayed with me for the entire 2.4 miles allowing me to sight on her and Mackenzie kayaked right next to me."

Kathleen was walking on air after she finished, "cause I never thought I could have gone that distance, but with my support team there wasn't a point when I doubted my success. I enjoyed every moment of the 2.4-mile swim!"



Social distancing with the COVID Ice Pops gave the Helena Ridley Swimmer Kathleen McElwain opportunities for a year of firsts.

Kathleen all smiles after swimming to Cemetery island and back.