

An Olympic Swimmer's Soul-Saving Mission

Drowning is one of the leading accidental causes of death for children. Cullen Jones, 29, almost became one of those statistics. Instead, he is an Olympic swimmer.

Jones' speed and skill in the swimming pool have led to two gold and two silver Olympic medals. He's also only the second African-American in history to take gold in swimming.

Jones sat down with CBN News at the Mecklenburg County Aquatic Center for a candid conversation about his life, career and passion to see that everyone learns to swim.

"I had a lot of success in London," Jones said, recalling his most recent Olympic success. "And my life has changed a lot: a lot more red carpets, airline food and hotels. It's been fun. I enjoy it."

A Fashionable Athlete

Swimming has helped to make Jones a celebrity, and a bit of a fashion icon. His sense of style is a gift from his father.

"My dad was big into when you walk out the house you represent the Jones family. And it has always stuck with me," Cullen shared.

"I'm very into fashion," he continued. "And at first I thought I really wanted to write for *GQ* and I still think that is something that is on my plate and I would love to do. But I have kind of evolved that into wanting to start my own line."

Still, more important than his fashion and fame, swimming has given Jones a platform to preach a life-saving message.

Swimming: More Than a Sport

"We need to change the perception of swimming from just being

a sport, which it is a great sport and great activity, but it is also a life skill," he said. "This is something that people need to learn how to do. It is just like riding a bike. Once you learn, you never forget."

Cullen nearly drowned at age 5 while visiting a Pennsylvania water park with his parents. His float flipped over in the deep end of the pool.

The accident sent him plunging under water for about 30 seconds. A child can drown in as little as 20 seconds.

"They say at 5 you start remembering things. I vividly remember what it feels like and I have gone to that place a couple of times in practice, where I have to hold my breath for really, really long," Cullen told CBN News, recalling the incident. "Knowing what it feels like to be almost helpless and being under water and looking up and saying that may be too far for me to get to air.

"I mean I was apprehensive about getting back in the water. It took my mom pushing me and making sure I was at practices and learning how to swim," he continued. "I went through three different teachers before I actually started to feel comfortable enough after my incident at Dorney Park to be comfortable enough to put my face in the water.

"I can tell you right now, I have four Olympic medals. I can't float. There, I said it. I can't float. I sink," Cullen admitted. "But because I know how to swim, I can keep myself above water and swim at a very, very fast speed."

The Community Servant

The Olympian now feels more at home in the water than out of it. And when Cullen is not training, he travels with the USA Swimming Foundation and Phillips 66.

Their "Make a Splash" tour helps children get comfortable in the water and beat the alarming statistics that Cullen rattles

off without missing a beat.

"Sixty percent of Latin Americans don't know how to swim," Cullen said. "Under the age of 14, it's the second leading cause of accidental death among children ... and nearly 70 percent of African-Americans don't know how to swim."

That 70 percent puts African-Americans at the greatest risk of drowning. A University of Memphis study looked at why many avoid the water.

The reasons include fear, having parents who don't swim and even concerns about physical appearance.

"When it comes to men, it's wearing small speedos. And when it comes to ladies and their hair, it's a big issue. I get it," Cullen said.

"My mom, she spends good money on her hair. And if it gets wet, it's gone," he continued. "And they want me to speak on it because it is an issue. And when I make a waterproof cap, besides being a multi-millionaire, I will let everyone know about it."

It Could Have Been Me

Until the day he makes that discovery, Cullen will share his survival story, along with stories of pain and loss, like the story of one amazing mother in Toledo, Ohio.

"Wanda Butts is like another mom to me. When I hear her story, I tear up instantly because that was pretty much almost what my mom had to go through," Cullen told CBN News.

Butts's 16-year-old son, Josh, drowned during a rafting trip with friends on a Michigan lake. She recounted the story to CBN News.

"Josh was in the water on the raft and he got in trouble. Somehow the raft floated out to where it got deeper and deeper and Josh could not swim. And he started calling for help,"

Butts said.

"His friends were back up on land, and by the time somebody got to him, it was too late," she said.

Like many African-Americans, a fear of drowning had been passed down through several generations of the Butts family.

"My dad saw one of his relatives drown when he was a youngster. It gave him a tremendous fear of drowning. He instilled that in me and so I gave it to my son," Butts recalled.

A sign now stands at that Michigan lake, both as a warning and a reminder of Josh's drowning.

"I didn't know that Josh should know how to swim." Wanda said. "But I know now that swimming is a life skill, that everybody should know how to swim."

The Josh Project

A year after the tragedy, Butts started a program to teach children to swim. It's called the Josh Project.

"I believe it was put on my heart from the Lord because I was having a hard time dealing with the death of my son," Butts said. "My only son, my pride and joy, loved dearly, my son. I had prayed for a son."

"When I lost my son, I knew the way I felt and I could feel how another mother would. And I didn't want another mother to have to suffer the way I can, will, and do for the rest of my life," she said.

Thousands of kids now swim, thanks to the Josh Project programs in Toledo, Ohio, and Norfolk, Va.

And one of the Josh Project's biggest supporters is Cullen Jones.

"If you are blessed, you have to give back. So for me, my way of giving back when I won in 2008 and I got a gold medal, a friend of mine said, 'Do you know what you can do for the sport of swimming?' And I made that bigger," he said.

"Do you know how you can give back? And working with the Make a Splash Initiative was my way of giving back and getting my pastor off my back," he said.

Finding Faith

Though he jokes about his pastor, the Rev. J. Michael Sanders of Fountain Baptist Church, Cullen said he prays all of his work and life honors the faith that has sustained him since he was a child.

Sanders introduced him to Christianity. Cullen was 12 when he began attending the New Jersey church.

"A month later, I found out my mom had cancer, and I think it helped me so much being at church every Sunday and hearing from my pastor and my pastor coming to me," Cullen recalled.

That comfort gave young Cullen courage to share his faith with his hero, his father.

"My mom said I blew my dad out of the water. I was 12 years old and I said, 'I am not worried about seeing mom after she passes away.' This is when she still had cancer. I am not worried about her. I will see her," Cullen remembered.

"But dad, I am worried about your soul because you don't go to church and you are so disconnect from church," he said. "That next Sunday, he never missed a day of church. He went every single Sunday. I was 12 years old."

Cullen's mom beat cancer twice, but his dad died of lung cancer when he was just 16. Ronald Jones wore the number 41 when he played college basketball in New York City. That number and a cross are tattooed on Cullen's back, and he is no

longer worried about his father's soul.

Cullen said he can still feel his father's impact on his life.

"He was there to hear me say that swimming was my passion and I was giving up basketball and I crushed his dreams because he wanted me to be a basketball player," Cullen recalled with a smile. "He was there until I was about [a] 16-year-old."

"He was at every single practice," Cullen said. "He pushed me just because he was an athlete himself."