

D.C. Kept Swimming Open During the Pandemic. It May Have Saved Me.

Date Created: January 14, 2021

Word count: 748

It is January 2021 in Washington, D.C. Every morning just before 9:00 a.m., a small percentage of D.C. residents are preparing – with a singular, obsessive focus – to do one thing when the clock strikes nine: clench a time slot in a D.C. public lap swimming lane. Time slots for future days come available seven days in advance, at 9:00 a.m.

This is a highly competitive ritual that requires perfect timing. Getting it right feels like winning the lottery. I know because – on days I remember to sign up – I am one of these people.

The D.C. Parks and Recreation Department has, with careful planning and effort, managed to keep some aquatic centers open for lap swimming during the pandemic. Swimming has given me a meaningful destination in a new world where I spend most of my time at home alone.

It has also rewarded me with several meaningful spinoff activities. First, finding the perfect combination of layers for cycling to swim and back (leggings stick to the skin when wet – sweatpants are best). Second, finding a new swimsuit that makes me look like the svelte athlete I am in my mind: more difficult than expected in the middle of a pandemic.

When I joked with a friend about my failed swimsuit quest, she texted back: “I can’t believe they haven’t shut that down.” I didn’t respond.

How could I explain that, for me, swimming in D.C. has been my solace? That I feel a swell of pride when I think about how my city – despite everything that’s happened – has worked to let us swim? That I believe movement is a path to healing?

Pandemic swimming now ranks among the defining moments of my D.C. life, along with some before the pandemic. Among those: submitting a tree request and watching it result in an actual tree; campaigning for a D.C. town council candidate and seeing her win; the time my neighbors all pitched in for a mariachi band (Mariachi Aguila DC) for our building holiday party and – when someone requested the hit Latin song Despacito – the band huddled to watch the music video and then improvised their way through the song to riotous cheers.

The time just before the pandemic, when I saved up for tickets to the 2020 New Year’s Eve party at The Willard and my date abandoned me on the dance floor, an hour before midnight,

to go to sleep. How, seeing me standing alone at midnight in the reggae room, an older couple turned to embrace and kiss me, wishing me “Happy New Year,” and in that single moment, I knew that everything would be okay. None of us knew what was to come. But we knew we would face it together.

This is my D.C..

One cold winter evening, I set out for a 7:00 pm swimming time slot I had snagged a week earlier. At the check-in desk, I must answer a list of questions before I am allowed in.

Because the locker rooms are closed to minimize contact with surfaces, everyone must undress poolside. Swimmers slowly arrive. We are Black, Brown, and White bodies, standing on the edge of the unknown.

On the other side of a low wall that segments two lap swimming pools, children are already swimming. As the clock hits the hour, with the nod of the lifeguard, we take off our face masks at the very last minute and plunge into the water, now aquatic beings. We are alone but together, plumbing the depths of our imaginations, splashing into the future. What it holds, we don't know, we just go.

Outside the pool, our clothes are flung on solitary folding metal chairs. The children's backpacks sit inside small circles marked on the floor, six feet apart.

Inside the pool, we are remembering and forgetting, thinking and not thinking. In our minds, we are crossing the English Channel, we are gliding along a Mediterranean coast.

Outside the building, 10,000 troops are preparing to descend on our city to guard the transition of power – and our democracy – as the inauguration of a new president approaches.

Inside the pool, we are swimming, we are weightless, we are free. Our bodies are the vessels for our dreams.

As I approach the end of my final lap, I spread out my arms and stop swimming, letting the momentum carry me forward. I pretend I am a spaceship preparing to dock. At this moment, I know exactly what the future holds: a perfect landing.