



## **Spotlight on the Michiana YMCA Swim Team**

When most people think of A1, a bottle of steak sauce comes to mind. That is not the case at the Michiana YMCA in South Bend, Indiana. A1 stands for All One. It is a concept that defines the culture of the Stingrays Swim Team program. "Where one goes, we all go," explains head coach Craig Fox. He and his coaching staff emphasize the importance of supporting one another and fostering a sense of belonging, not just among swimmers but among coaches, parents and families as well. "When we swim, the whole family swims together," says Fox, who has been at the Michiana YMCA for eight years.

That "team is family" concept is cultivated throughout the program. Older swimmers serve as "meet buddies" to younger swimmers so that they always feel encouraged and supported. When Fox's wife was battling breast cancer, the team sported pink swim caps to show their support while coaches and families stepped in to help in any way they could.

Another area of focus for the Stingrays is "The Big 3." Swimmers are expected to be their best in school, best in the pool and to be the best person they can be. Coaches promote and celebrate achievement in and out of the pool. They ask swimmers about grades and other activities. "They know that we care," says assistant coach Leslie Vanparys, who has been with the program for 23 years. She points to Fox's leadership and the positive relationships between coaches, parents and swimmers as the reasons why swimmers thrive at their YMCA.

Among the many "Craigisms" that Fox has coined, the team uses the term BOTTOS, which stands for break on through to the other side. Borrowed from the song by The Doors, it has become a term of encouragement, motivation and perseverance. At Short Course YMCA Nationals this year, team members Madison Blakesley and Stephanie Portolese spoke about the importance of BOTTOS and A1 in their devotion. They shared that these phrases, and the meaning behind them, empowered them to overcome obstacles and reach higher for themselves and for their teammates.

As a team, the Michiana Family YMCA Stingrays has grown to over 100 swimmers and they are the largest in South Bend, even with two other clubs within a five-mile radius. They have won ten Indiana State YMCA Championships and their swimmers excel at the local, state, regional and national levels. But as their team's web page says, they are proud of the team "not only for their wins, but for the friendships and self-confidence developed through teamwork and individual excellence as a member of the team." By creating a supportive environment and actively promoting achievement, relationships and a sense of belonging, the Michiana Family YMCA Stingrays are nurturing the potential of every child in the program. Their program is truly Youth Development in action.

