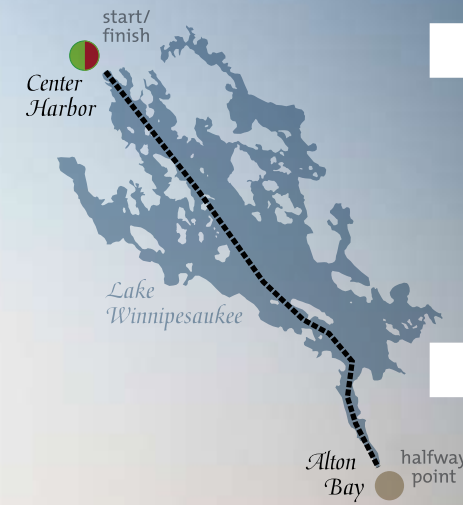


going the distance



In the early morning hours of September 2, 2009, Maury McKinney stood on the dock in Center Harbor on Lake Winnepesaukee. The dark, still water rippled under him as he pulled his goggles over his eyes and took a deep breath. He launched his sleek body like a torpedo into the lake, starting a 42-mile round-trip swim to Alton Bay and back. Twenty-six hours and 17 minutes later he eased back into Center Harbor, having sliced through a stretch of choppy, open water twice the length of the English Channel. As the first person to ever complete or even attempt a double crossing,

HE'D MADE HISTORY.

Story by Brian Irwin
Photographs by Anne Skidmore



“McKinney, a swim instructor, takes on these challenges because he’s driven by an inner flame to push himself, to challenge the natural world in a way that makes him healthier and happier. He does it because he’s exercising the ideals he likes to see in his students and in the children he coaches.”



McKinney

McKinney doesn't swim big water to win notoriety, which he has inadvertently gained. The prior year he swam one length of Winnepesaukee, across the broads and narrows without help other than a band of volunteer kayakers and powerboaters who provided safety and sustenance. He completed the swim in 12 hours. In 2010 he took on a shorter 16.8 mile route from Center Harbor to Wolfeboro Bay, a sufferfest during which he had to swim for five straight hours in strong currents and powerful weathercocking without pausing for a single rest.

McKinney also does not swim huge distances to fund-raise for the aquatic center he hopes will one day stand near his home in the Mount Washington Valley, a project that's become his passion. McKinney, a swim instructor, takes on these challenges because he's driven by an inner flame to push himself, to challenge the natural world in a way that makes him healthier and happier. He does it because he's exercising the ideals he likes to see in the children he coaches and in his students — students like Drew Mahoney.

Drew has severe autism. He is an active boy, 9 years old. His parents run King Pine

Ski Area in Madison and make sure he has every opportunity to enjoy everything his peers do. Drew skis. He plays. And he swims.

Two years ago Drew would splash in the water at The Mill, King Pine's indoor pool, wading into the deep end without heeding warnings. Literally running into water over his head, he'd come up sputtering with a nose full of acrid pool water, each time coming closer to drowning. He had just started swim lessons with McKinney.

Each week for the next three years Drew and McKinney would rendezvous at The Mill. By the third week Drew was

squeezing McKinney's nose each time they'd meet, his sign that he adores a person. Within a year he was floating on his own and was what McKinney refers to as "water safe." Within two years he was swimming laps without a flotation aid. A year later the pair swam the length of Purity Lake, King Pine Resort's half-mile long resource. Drew still has no intelligible speech. But he can swim.

McKinney has an anachronistic way about him. At age 50 his hair fell out long ago, however his fit body and negligible body fat content are youthfully preserved as a result of years of swimming



<< At the halfway point in Alton Bay, wife Karen McKinney, daughter Zoe McKinney (at right) and some of her swim team friends all jumped in to greet, hug and cheer on Maury before he turned around to swim back across the length of Lake Winnepesaukee.

“The sense of community and camaraderie was so pleasant and inspiring,” McKinney recalls. “It made me think of how having an aquatic facility in the [Mount Washington] Valley community could enhance the quality of life of our residents and visitors.”

McKinney continued to climb, but in 2006, after 27 years of retirement from swimming, he signed up for a U.S. Masters race. He had a strong finish, surprising as there was nowhere to train for races other than the local ponds, and even those were only free of ice half of the year. More races followed, with a collection of top-10 U.S. Masters finishes. It became clear to McKinney that although he was an accomplished climber, alpinism was a detour, a foray he enjoyed and one that was melting into the local lakes and pools.

A year later McKinney started teaching swim lessons and within a year of that he sold his partnership in IMCS and took up swim instruction full time. He was done guiding. At the age of 47 he had already retired twice and come out of retirement once, which is where he is today.

“I knew from the very first day that teaching swimming was something I could do for the rest of my life,” says McKinney. “Working as a climbing guide for 20 years gave me valuable experience in how to work with people of differing ages, backgrounds and abilities and how to manage risk effectively. There is an elemental joy in water and swimming. I swim because it feels good and gives me an inner sense of happiness and peace. I think it makes me a happier and healthier person.”

But McKinney has a problem. There isn't a decent competition pool within an hour of North Conway. Drew's family has a pleasant recreational pool at King Pine, but other than that McKinney was restricted to utilizing the small pool at the historic Eastern Slope Inn. In response to the paucity of facilities, in 2007 McKinney founded the White Mountain Aquatic Foundation, a 501(c)(3) organization that has one mission: build a 40,000-square-foot, three-pool public aquatic facility completely free of tax funding.

and mountain climbing. He's short and stocky with a charming smile and a confident posture. McKinney grew up in central Florida and started swimming when he was young, launching himself off the high dive at age 3. He was always a gifted swimmer, competing his entire youth. He eventually earned a congressional appointment to West Point. As a freshman on the varsity swim team, he did quite well until he was afflicted with debilitating rotator cuff tendonitis and Crohn's disease. At the young age of 19, McKinney retired from competitive swimming.

He would eventually leave West Point and enroll in Auburn University where he graduated with a B.S. in Biology. A few years later he left his almost-complete master's degree to walk the Appalachian Trail. He made it as far as the White Mountains, where he pulled into North Conway and found himself awestruck by the toothy cliffs, the vibrant town and the sugary summit of Mount Washington in the backdrop. He never left.

McKinney hadn't swum for years; he was more motivated by the vertical movement up the area's steep ice pillars and granite faces than the flat water of a lake or pool. This was very convenient for McKinney. The Mount Washington Valley has a myriad of alpine offerings for the aspiring climber. The pools, however, were limited to hotel-based puddles with rubber liners and maximum lengths of 50 feet. Even if McKinney wanted to swim competitively, there was nowhere to do it.

For the next decade and a half McKinney was employed as a climber and guide, with the exception of a two-year stint as

the backcountry caretaker at the Appalachian Mountain Club's Hermit Lake Shelters at the toe of the notable Tuckerman Ravine. He was welded into a lifestyle of outdoor adventure, pushing himself harder and higher into the giant mountains of the world.

In all McKinney would tally 20 climbing expeditions to the greater ranges. He would attempt a new winter route to the summit of Annapurna I, one of the 14 highest peaks in the world and the most objectively dangerous of the coveted 8,000-meter peaks, perhaps even more so than Everest. Annapurna IV and other Himalayan peaks scratched their way into his climbing résumé. Finally, in 1996, after returning home from an exhausting trip to climb Pakistan's Gasherbrum II, he took a job as the director of International Mountain Climbing School, or IMCS. Within a few years he was president and partner in the business, which is arguably the most prestigious climbing school in the eastern U.S.

His life changed during a climbing trip to Ecuador in 2004. Always an early riser, McKinney was strolling around the small town of Banos when he happened upon the town's hot springs. There, at the ripe hour of 6 a.m., he sat and watched five concrete pools roil with the splashing of hundreds of bathers. A community pool that brought everyone together. Tiny babies swaddled in bright, Ecuadorian blankets swung in the arms of their mothers while they waded in the steamy water. Kids splashed and played games. Older men sat on the stairs and discussed town politics.



His project, which someday may reside at the eastern end of the iconic Kancamagus Highway, won't be cheap. An estimated \$15 million will be needed to erect the facility, which he hopes will have three pools: a competition pool, rehab pool and recreation pool. Perhaps a glass-and-wood structure, perhaps a more practical but less aesthetic concrete dome, this facility has the potential to anchor a community.

At this point McKinney is not counting the millions in his foundation's endowment, rather he is reaching out to complete the funding for the feasibility study that he is confident will support his dream. When he's hit his mark with fundraising, a Midwestern firm will execute a study and report he hopes will back the unofficial opinion of USA Swimming, the sport's governing body and consultative expert, and declare the Mount Washington Valley the ideal locale for a new swim facility.

In 2008 McKinney started the Saco Valley Swim Club, a youth swim club that treks an hour to Dover on occasion to compete in swim meets, the first such entity in the history of the Mount Washington Valley. Within three years his number of competitive swimmers climbed from eight to 41, all of them begging for a local pool, a better, closer place to call home water. And while McKinney's dream drifts closer to him along the horizon, he's not lost focus on what counts most to him: teaching people to swim. He's taught those from six months old to age 71 and at this point is instructing full time. Without a dedicated facility. At least for now. **NH**

A Note from the Author

This story grew out of some personal experience. My 6-year-old son Andy is terrified of the water. For a few years McKinney would work with him, absorbing temper tantrums and inadvertent kicks to the goggles that come with the job. Patiently, McKinney would ease him into confidence and teach him the skills to float and paddle, all while swimming around Andy shooting photos and offering stern, loving pointers. McKinney would roll and curl in the water around Andy's body like a playful otter as the scared boy kicked the length of the pool. Andy did it, because he knew Maury was just an arm's length away.

My other son, Reid, just started lessons with McKinney. At age 3 he's currently at level one, where he's learning how to kick the length of the pool with flotation aids. Again Maury coils his body around Reid's afterwash, staying just a nose-length ahead or behind him. On the way home from lessons my two sons were discussing their experience and their instructor.

“Andy?” Reid asked. “Is Maury a super hero?”

Andy replied.

“No. But he swims like one.”



PHOTOS BY BRIAN IRWIN



Water Powered

Galvanized to action by the recent closing of a popular aquatic facility, the White Mountain Aquatic Foundation recently signed a three-year lease to operate and manage the indoor pool at the New England Inn in Intervale. This facility will be our new “home” and will allow them to meet the aquatic needs of the Mt. Washington Valley community while promoting their mission to develop a modern, multiple-pool community aquatic center.

