

Name	Pauline Bermingham
Tell us how Swimming has changed your life! (500-1000 words)	
<p>Hello, my name is Pauline, I am 69 years old and I can say with confidence that I am a swimmer!</p> <p>My story begins in January 2010. I was at a crossroads in my life. My best friend, whom I'd known for more than 40 years, had just died from cancer at the age of 66. I was almost 3 stone overweight and I was feeling very low. It was really a case of giving in to my feelings or continuing to mourn my friend and get on with my life as she would have wanted. That is what I did. I joined a slimming club and one year later, 2 stone and 13 pounds lighter, I had reached my goal weight.</p> <p>Around that time, a friend told me about an advertisement for swimming lessons in the local swimming pool. She tempted me by saying that swimming was one sure way of maintaining my new figure. Despite my fear, I began to give it some thought. At this stage I was 66 and terrified of the water. I am just 5 feet tall and even the shallow end of most swimming pools reached my shoulders. I had tried to learn a few times in the past, but rarely made it beyond the steps, or occasionally progressed to gripping on to the nearest bar. The thought of my head going under the water was a complete nightmare. On holidays or on short breaks in nice hotels I was always the one who couldn't avail of the leisure facilities. Swimmers wouldn't be aware of the fact that most hotel swimming pools don't have a rail, so at my height, getting in the pool wasn't an option as I couldn't even go in and hang on to the bar!</p> <p>I had reached my weight loss goal, so I decided if I could do that I was ready for a new challenge. Thus began my journey to becoming a swimmer. With trepidation, I made enquiries about the swimming lessons. I needn't have worried. I met my wonderful swimming teacher, Patricia Reilly, and together we have transformed me into quite a competent and confident swimmer. My first challenge was to overcome my fear of the water and to give me the confidence to realise that going under the water didn't necessarily mean that I was going to drown! It was slow in the beginning, but with Patricia's patience</p>	

and encouragement I made steady progress. We eventually reached the deep end, still with me holding on to the bar, but it was a wonderful moment when I first let go of the bar, pushed myself down to the bottom of the pool, (quite a distance for little me) and popped right up again. I now realised that it was actually more difficult to stay under the water than it was to float. Many times I felt that I was getting nowhere, but my wise and patient teacher assured me that I would never go backwards – all that I had learned would stay with me and we would build on that. How right she was! I learned all the basic skills like threading water and gliding along with my face under water. The latter showed that I had great lung capacity, as evidenced by the fact that I could stay under the water for what seemed like ages. Later, when I was learning the front crawl I could get a fair distance up the pool without coming up for air. Whether this was a good thing or a bad thing is a moot point, as achieving my first breath in the front crawl was my biggest challenge! However, once I cracked it, I progressed in leaps and bounds and I haven't looked back since. Earlier this year I joined the Sports Centre in DCU and, as well as my weekly lesson with Patricia, I try to swim there twice a week. Yesterday I swam 20 lengths and felt like a 19 year old rather than a 69 year old!

What has learning to swim done for me? It is no exaggeration to say that it is one of the best things I have ever done. The sense of achievement is immense. I absolutely love swimming and feel so much at home in the water. As well as the enormous health benefits, the fact that I could go swimming in the sea added to the enjoyment of the wonderful summer which we have just had. I can now go to a posh hotel and avail of all the leisure facilities on offer. The fact that, three years on, I have maintained my goal weight is positive proof that swimming is the best exercise possible – particularly for somebody my age. Any aches or pains disappear as soon as I get in the water and I genuinely believe that I am fitter now than I was when I retired nine years ago.

Although Patricia says that I can stop my lessons if I want to, there is no way I am going to do that. I love meeting up with her every week, and there is always something new to learn. Now if somebody asks if I can swim I answer in the affirmative. If they ask if I am any good, I can say 'of course'! Although Patricia and I joke that its 'next stop Rio' as I said at the beginning of this piece, my name is Pauline and I am a swimmer.