Averting tragedy
Demonstration of mock drowning teaches local kids rules of pool safety

By Buford Davis
THP

A tuft of dark hair and a bright blue swimsuit hang at the water’s surface as the shrill bleat from a lifeguard’s whistle suspends normal activity at the municipal pool.

Two lifeguards work efficiently to remove the small, limp body from the water and begin cardiopulmonary resuscitation. Children watch silently from the scene’s perimeter as the minutes tick by and firefighter paramedics arrive and take over from the lifeguards.

There are faint signs of life from the child on the stretcher, engulfed by the dark clad paramedics, a surreal reversal image of crows pecking at carrion. The boy’s mother stands only a few feet away, clutching a younger child. She is quiet, seemingly emotionless. Shock can evoke that behavior. So can a simulation.

“I’m supposed to pretend to drown, and that’s it,” said eight-year-old Ricky D’Angelo, who is participating in the city’s Junior Lifeguard program, and was asked to play the part of victim for the June 17 mock drowning at the Henderson Multigenerational Center. “I’m slightly, slightly nervous.”

Drowning is the single leading cause of accidental death in children under four years of age. “Safe Pools Rule” is a safety education campaign conducted by Henderson Fire Department and Henderson Professional Firefighters, the Southern Nevada chapter of the American Red Cross, the City of Henderson Park and Recreation Department and RockStar Pool care.

Seeing with ‘Eagle Eyes’
Local boy living with cerebral palsy is first in area to benefit from innovative technology

By Michelle Cutler
THP

Nine year old Tyler has never been able to ask for a drink when thirsty. He has never been able to tell his parents that he loves them. He has never learned to count or read. He has never even recognized the relationship between cause and effect until a few months ago when he started using Eagle Eyes, an electronic system that tracks eye movement like a computer mouse.

Born with cerebral palsy, Tyler is paralyzed and communicates only by vague facial expressions, ambiguous sounds and, occasionally, tears. His dedicated parents Mike and Kristy Tilton hope the innovative technology will improve his ability to interact with the world around him.

“To see Tyler using this device and thinking of the possibilities is indescribable,” said Kristy. “The thought of him being able to tell me what is hurting when he cries or that he loves me or even just ‘hi mom’ is beyond words.”

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The Tiltons are the first in the area to acquire Eagle Eyes, and the Hendergasques feel fortunate to be one of only 40 families and organizations currently using the system across the country.

The award-winning system uses electrodes attached to the face to translate eye movement into computer cursor activity and enable hands-free navigation through Microsoft Windows-based programs projected onto a television screen. Medical experts consider Eagle Eyes ideal for people of all ages who have limited mobility as a result of conditions such as stroke, traumatic brain injury, Rett syndrome, spinal muscular atrophy, severe cerebral palsy and neurological disorders.

“Tyler picked up on it immediately,” said Kristy, “and it was just so exciting to see him be able to do it and to succeed. It’s crazy how fast he did it...And then we hooked Mike up and he kind of struggled with it.”

“Actually, his disability is his advantage with this,” said Mike Tilton, “because it only detects eye movement. (Able people instinctively turn their heads to look at something, doing more work with their necks than with their eyes.) Tyler has such limited movement that he moves his eyes more than his head and that’s what this system detects. I had to really concentrate on holding my head absolutely still and watching it completely with my eyes.”

The Tiltons enjoy watching Tyler progress through the baby steps that are enabling him to communicate.

“We have been waiting 10 years to hear him say his first words,” Kristy said, “and I can see it getting closer every time he uses Eagle Eyes.”

They also hope that the program will eventually help Tyler accomplish something they formerly never imagined possible — an academic education.

“There’s a story that I read online of a kid who actually graduated from a typical high school using this,” said Kristy. “It’s so amazing and encouraging and exciting!”

“So many of these kids that we work with are so bright, they’re just locked in bodies that don’t work,” said Debbie Inckley, Executive Director and founder of the Opportunity Foundation of America (OFOA), the nonprofit organization currently producing Eagle Eyes. “It’s not a magic answer...but it’s a fabulous tool that begins to open these kids’ worlds.”

Though many investors have encouraged the developer to produce the system for lucrative profit, the OFOA manufactures and distributes the system at minimal cost. Inckley, whose nonprofit foundation hopes to improve quality of life for severely disabled people, hopes to spread the word to families and schools nationwide that the technology is available and affordable.

For more information on Eagle Eyes and/or to arrange donations visit opportunityfoundationofamerica.org or contact Inckley directly at debbieinkley@ofoa.net or 801.231.6691.