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Why a career auditor opened a high-tech MoCo swim school

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When Denise Dombay opened a Montgomery County swim school in September, the first-time business owner thought it would fill a void. Now, she knows it.

The Maryland mom, a college swimmer with a 30-year finance career, brought Denver-based SwimLabs to Gaithersburg last fall as the franchise's 14th location. Six months later, her space at 353 Muddy Branch Road sees about 400 beginner and competitive swimmers for lessons — and she expects that to double by summer.



COURTESY DENISE DOMBAYSWIMLABS

Dombay is preparing for heightened demand because parents want their kids to be pool-ready for camps and vacations, and the start of the popular Montgomery County Swim League means thousands of swimmers seeking training, she said. That surge likely wouldn't slow down until August or September.

To handle the influx, Dombay is booking clients and hiring staff, adding more competitive coaches and experienced instructors to her 25-person team, she said. That could grow to 35 or 40 employees once at full capacity.

The 6,000-square-foot SwimLabs space has six pool lanes and endless high-tech warm-water pools. They have currents that create resistance to keep swimmers from advancing to the wall (think the equivalent of a water treadmill). Submerged cameras videotape their sessions for immediate feedback and swimmers can watch the film at home (video analysis ranges from \$85 to \$100 for a half-hour). The school offers group and private lessons for kids and adults learning to swim at all levels, and training for competitive swimmers and triathletes who want to improve technique or speed (basic group lessons are \$27 per class or \$109 per month).

"For a lot of people, when they see it on the television screen, it just clicks," Dombay said.

Dombay decided to open SwimLabs after working in accounting and auditing for nearly three decades, as a partner at Arthur Andersen, then at Ernst & Young, and head of internal audit for Marriott International Inc. (NASDAQ: MAR).

“What I loved in the corporate world was coaching and developing people, I loved seeing young people come out of college and watch them grow in the firm or in the company, and I also loved swimming,” she said. In college she swam on an athletic scholarship for George Washington University’s team, and has kept it up since then, most recently at the masters level in Germantown.

SwimLabs came onto her radar as she re-evaluated the next chapter of her career, and she thought the model would succeed locally, Dombay said. Private swim lessons are hard to come by in this area, with county pools running strict programming and private lessons at competitors like British Swim School and Kids First filling up just as fast. And while SwimLabs has sister company Machine Aquatics in Vienna, “it’s a niche that, especially for the competitive swimmers, is not currently served” in Maryland, Dombay said.

Dombay has self-funded her business with \$1.4 million to date, but would need to raise money for a potential second location, which could be on the horizon, she said. She generates \$40,000 in monthly revenue, but she’s expecting that to double and ultimately targeting about \$1 million in annual revenue. The company isn’t yet profitable but Dombay said she expects to break even in April, though that won’t yet cover her personal investment.

While Dombay anticipates the space will see plenty of kids this summer, reaching established swimmers hasn’t been as easy. She has used print advertising, events and social media to build her client base, and also sponsors summer swim teams and has hired coaches from local teams — from Nation’s Capital Swim Club (Olympian Katie Ledecky’s team) and Rockville Montgomery Swim Club, among others — who help spread the word.

“It’s been a pleasant surprise to see reaction of parents and kids; they just love the facility, they love the way their kids come out happy and smiling,” she said. “The competitive side has taken a little longer than I thought.”

Sara Gilgore
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