

## “What Swimming in the NHSA Has Meant to Me”

I've moved around since the day I was born. With my father being in the military, my family has followed him all over the U.S. and even abroad. While there were many unanswered questions, concerns, hopes, and dreams throughout each shift, swimming was the one constant. I have been swimming since I was six years old. When I first moved to Vermont, my mother, who was a swimmer herself, made it very clear I had to at least try for the swim team that summer. That summer turned into the next summer, and the next. I complained, had a hard time getting into the water, and refused to do flip turns or swim backstroke. Each year in my youth, I wasn't too enthusiastic about the swim season, and yet, each year, I found myself at UVAC for states, swimming my heart out in whatever event I put my mind to.

If there's one thing swimming has taught me, it is that the painful memories of training yourself to reach your goals become a distant memory once you take those steps to truly accomplishing them. What instead replaces that temporary pain is the gain of strength, both mentally and physically, as well as valuable relationships that bring you indescribable joy.

When my family moved abroad to North Macedonia, many places were shut down because of the pandemic; the city pool, however, remained open. I found that swimming was what brought me strength and courage as I navigated learning a new language and communicating with my coach and others on my team in broken Macedonian and English. In the hardest period of adjustment and change, I still fell back on swimming to ease my mind. However, I still found myself missing my old team along with the memories we shared swimming at NHSA events. The connections I made abroad simply couldn't compare to the ones I had with my teammates back in Vermont. The memories of swimming relays at UVAC, cheering for the team at the edge of the pool deck, and running around the tented areas with my friends always came back into my mind, making me wish I could finally be back home swimming with the people I truly loved.

When my family made the move from North Macedonia back to Vermont, I was more than ready to reconnect with my longtime coach and family friend by joining a summer team she was involved with. This new team re-sparked my love for swimming. I found myself enjoying every second of it, and this time, as an upperclassman on the team, I encouraged and watched my younger teammates grow and thrive. Just showing up to swim practice had gone from a dreadful thought to my six-year-old self to the highlight of my day as a senior. This change is because of the people and community who make up this program. I would do anything to see my teammates smile, and I would swim any event to make my coaches proud... even backstroke.

Swimming has taught me not only about myself and my own individual mind-to-body connection, but it has also created a bridged gateway to lasting connections and relationships that have made me understand what I look for within a community.

