

# Escape from Alcatraz

*Litchfield Park girl swims from S.F. prison to shore in effort to raise money*

by Frank Morris  
staff writer

The conditions of San Francisco Bay can be turbulent, but little Emma Villasenor of Litchfield Park faced them head on, literally, and for a good cause.

Emma, age 9, recently swam roughly 1.5 miles from Alcatraz Island to the shores of San Francisco in an effort to raise awareness for drowning prevention.

She joined a team of 49 other youths from across the Valley, who comprised Team Alcatraz, led by Joe Zemaitis.

The group of children, ages 8 to 17, brought in nearly \$50,000 in donations for the Foundation for Aquatics Safety and Training (FAST), a nonprofit organization started by Zemaitis to bring attention to childhood drownings.

"Emma has single handedly raised over \$3,300 to benefit FAST, all through her own secure Web site page, phone calls, T-shirt sales, direct mail and door-to-door," the girl's mother, Melinda, said. "It was quite an accomplishment."

The Litchfield Elementary School pupil said she was more than happy to partake in the swim, despite the hard work.

"I really want to help people know they don't have to drown," Emma said. "You should always learn how to



View photo by Ray Thomas

**EMMA VILLASENOR**, 9, of Litchfield Park trains May 8 at the Southwest Regional YMCA. She is a member of the Westside Silver Fins. On May 1, Emma "escaped from Alcatraz" in the cold waters of San Francisco Bay.

swim before you're about 5 or 6 years old, because you don't know what will happen if you have a pool in your backyard."

### Preparing for cold waters

Emma's been swimming for six years, and has been on the West Side Silver Fins swim club for the past two years.

"I just feel it's very important that my children learn to swim; that they understand and respect water. Water safety is a huge issue here in Arizona," Melinda said. "My children have been able to swim before they could walk."

Zemaitis said Team Alcatraz had been training for the swim since October, which involved taking the children to Lake Pleasant and Bartlett Lake during Arizona's cooler months.

"We wanted to get them used to cold water," he said.

While the waters of San Francisco Bay can be treacherous at times, on the day of the swim, May 1, conditions were ideal, he said.

"The water was 52 degrees, so it was cold, but we got lucky with a great day," Zemaitis said. "It was a clear, sunny day, the waters were calm; it was about the best I'd ever seen it."

### Fast swimmer

Though this was Emma's first time partaking in the swim, the youngster accomplished quite the feat, her mother said.

"She did the swim in 57 minutes," Melinda said. "The closest most of them had come in previous years was an hour and a half."

To accomplish such a task took a lot of dedication and

determination, Emma said.

"Sometimes I felt tired when I breathed too much, so I had to slow down my breathing and get calmer," she said. "And I had to get used to the fear for a while, but when I got there, I was good."

Melinda expressed a sense of motherly pride for her daughter. "I am just ecstatic," she said. "This was a personal goal she set for herself and she carried it through and came through with flying colors."

Emma felt pretty good about it, too, she said. "I wanted for me to get a workout and for me to get stronger and just to have fun with it," the 9-year-old said. "I got through the fear of the water and the coldness, and I was just trying my hardest and felt like I'm going really fast."

Emma and her team have every reason to be pleased with their performance, Zemaitis said.

"The training was hard, the swim wasn't easy; I'm sure there were times when they wanted to quit," he said. "But they worked past the obstacles, and every single kid who jumped off the boat made it to shore with no problems whatsoever."

Plus, it was important for the children to set a goal, he said. "It's so important for the kids to know, when they're spending that much time and energy doing something, that they know why they're doing it."

"It was just an amazing experience for everybody," Melinda said.

To learn about the Foundation for Aquatics Safety and Training, visit [www.thefastfoundation.com](http://www.thefastfoundation.com).

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