



**Mr. Gaius Voúte, President, Maatschappij tot Redding van Drenkelingen,
presenting its 250th anniversary Medal of Honour to
Lifesaving Foundation Secretary John Connolly
Thursday 12th October 2017
Amsterdam**

**Full text of address by
John Connolly**



It is an honour to be here with you today commemorating the 250th anniversary of Maatschappij tot Redding van Drenkelingen. The significance, to citizens of The Netherlands, of the anniversary event is best illustrated by the presence of Her Royal Highness Princess Beatrix (formerly Queen Beatrix) here today. It is a humbling experience for me as an Irish man to have been selected as the recipient of Maatschappij's anniversary Medal of Honour.

I have been asked to tell you about some of my lifesaving achievements and beliefs. I would like to state here at the beginning of my address that much of what I have achieved has only been possible due to the support of my wife Phil and of our children. This includes Phil taking full responsibility for our 5 children thereby giving me the freedom to travel throughout Ireland and Britain in the early years on behalf of the Royal Life Saving Society in Ireland and more recently throughout Africa and Asia on behalf of The Lifesaving Foundation.

My first achievement was starting school swimming lessons in Ireland twenty years before it was introduced into the Irish school curriculum. In the beginning I just wanted to provide swimming instruction to the boys in my own school and ended up organising swimming instruction for over 50 schools in my district. Once the schools in my district started providing swimming instruction to pupils it quickly spread to schools throughout the whole of Ireland. Some unintended positive consequences of children learning to swim in school were the all-day opening of swimming pools that had previously only opened at night; the creation of new jobs for lifeguards, swimming teachers, and even bus drivers; and non-swimmer parents, embarrassed at not being able to swim with their children, began taking swimming lessons at night and at week-ends.

At the birth of our first child my wife Phil and I agreed that she would stop working and become a full time mother to what would become our five children. We needed two incomes to pay our bills so in addition to my being a school teacher I also worked as a lifeguard and swimming teacher for over 30 years.

During this 30 year time period I rescued over 100 persons from drowning, taught over 5,000 persons to swim, and trained hundreds of pool and beach lifeguards. I established community lifeguard services on two beaches and placed a fast response community lifeboat in a fishing village. I ended my lifeguard career on being appointed head teacher of my school.

I am best known today for founding the charity The Lifesaving Foundation with my friend Brendan Donohoe. The Foundation helped establish national lifesaving organisations in Kenya and in Lesotho. It has funded the training of about 2000 unemployed young swimmers as lifeguards in developing countries. This gave the unemployed youth's job qualifications and communities lifeguards and first aiders.

The Foundation promotes drowning research. It has organised seven international drowning research conferences. Our 8th conference is planned for Ireland in 2018. Our members are involved in different types of drowning research. Brendan, for example, is researching why people risk their lives rescuing others and I am investigating why swimmers drown.

My research identified The First Time Problem. Some swimmers drown because they are warm swimming pool only swimmers. They are confused first and then overwhelmed by the number of new experiences they have to deal with swimming in clothing in cold open water.

I identified the Exit Problem. Some swimmers drown because, having swum to the water's edge, they are unable to leave the water, succumb to fatigue, fall unconscious, and die.

For over 20 years I have investigated the tragic problem of suicide by drowning. Suicide by drowning is a world problem. It is a hidden pandemic illustrated by the fact that most published national drowning reports deliberately remove suicidal drowning deaths from the reported figures. My research indicates that the majority of suicides change their minds about dying once they physically start to drown but they are then unable to save themselves. If they can somehow survive that first suicide attempt the majority of survivors live full lives.

The Foundation has a major project researching self-rescue in common drowning situations. It is called The I Am Not Drowning Project. We have just concluded the first part of the project publishing a poster explaining how to survive the first minutes of a clothed entry into cold open water. The majority of those who die by drowning do not survive the first five minutes of an immersion. They are not buoyant on top of the water and are not breathing regularly. The truth is they die because they don't know how not to drown. They often panic, and lose all ability to help themselves. The I Am Not Drowning Project is paused at the moment. We are seeking funding to publish a book outlining self rescue actions in common drowning situations.

This is not my first visit to Amsterdam.

I came here with my colleague Brendan Donohoe and our wives in 2002 to attend the first World Congress on Drowning. I thought that it was a wonderful event. There was only one thing wrong with the Congress – I did not present at it. I did understand that this was my own fault. I had not spoken or presented at any previous international conference. I determined that I would present at the next world conference and I did, speaking not once but twice, on Swimming Rescues by Irish Police Officers and on Suicide by Drowning in Ireland.

When the Handbook on Drowning was published I thought it was a wonderful book. There was only one thing wrong with the book - I was not in it – because I had not published any research papers. I determined that when the Handbook was revised and reprinted I would be in it and I was, not once but twice contributing papers on Suicide by Drowning Worldwide and on Foreign Holiday Drownings. I want to thank Handbook editor Professor Joost Bierens for giving me an opportunity to educate the world lifesaving community on suicide by drowning and on the specific drowning dangers associated with foreign holidays – especially for our children.

During the 2002 world congress agreement was reached on the Amsterdam definition of drowning. It is a simple definition – if you experience breathing difficulty in water you are drowning. As I listened to the definition being explained I realised that I had drowned – not once, not even twice but three times. Two of my three drowning events occurred while I was involved in lifeguard training – once while practicing extended breath holding underwater and the second while training with a surf ski in very big surf. The third drowning event occurred on holiday when I was washed into a cave while snorkelling. On all three occasions no one knew that I was in trouble and I self-rescued.

If you are to understand why I do what I do I need to tell you of two events that happened in my childhood.

When I was 12 years old my family visited a local beach on a sunny day. I climbed to the top of a 10 metre high storm wall and looked along the crowded beach. My attention was drawn to four young men attempting to play soccer with a large light plastic ball. The ball was blown out into the ocean by a gust of wind and all four youths ran into the water after it. Three of them stopped at waist depth water and I thought ‘those three cannot swim’. The fourth youth started to swim out after the ball.

High up on the storm wall I saw that the ball was being blown out into the ocean faster than the young man could swim after it. I thought ‘he will realise that he cannot reach the ball and will stop and turn back’ – but he didn’t stop. A lifeguard swam out after the young man and I thought ‘he will stop now’ – but he didn’t stop. The lifeguard was speeding through the water but before he reached the youth he submerged. The lifeguard dived and recovered the youth. He towed the young man back to the beach where resuscitation was started. A local doctor arrived and after a short time a blanket was placed over the youth’s dead body.

Although I was only 12 years old I knew then that this young man had died because he could swim. Four had played football and four had run out into the ocean. Three could not swim and were alive, one could swim and he was dead. I also knew that

the lifeguard had only been able to do what he had magnificently done because he could swim.

Being able to swim is not a vaccination against drowning.

Being able to swim can cost you your life and being able to swim can save your own life and the lives of others.

They buried the youth in a grave at the front door of my church. As I went to church every week I would pass his grave. If I was alone I would often stop and look at his grave. I would think and sometimes say out loud 'It is your own fault that you are in this grave. Why didn't you stop? Why didn't you turn back?' Understandably he never answered.

As a boy I lived in house number 25. My boyhood friend Jimmy lived in number 24. Jimmy was 16 years old and I was 15. It was a Friday night in June 1966. We played handball up to 7.00pm and then separated. I went to a first aid meeting and Jimmy went cycling on his new racing bicycle.

My meeting was in a hall on the roadside of the quay. As I left the hall after the meeting I saw that a large crowd had gathered on the riverside. I asked a man what was happening. He said that a boy had drowned; that the police do not know who is in the river but that was his racing bike over there. I could not catch my breath. I vomited. I knew that bike – it was Jimmy's.

Jimmy had cycled onto the wharf to speak to two men who were fishing between the wharf and a moored ship. The front wheel of his bicycle went down into the sunken track for a crane and Jimmy was thrown into the river. He hit his head on the bulbous bow of the ship as he fell. He submerged, and died, never having a chance to swim. I took the police to Jimmy's house and I heard Jimmy's Mum scream.

I passed the young man's grave every week but it would be 20 years before I visited Jimmy's grave. He is buried in a cemetery one hour's walk from my home but it was a walk I could not make.

In time I understood that most drowning deaths are preventable or are avoidable. Had the council erected a wall on the riverside Jimmy would not have been able to enter the wharf and he would not have drowned. If Jimmy had dismounted and had rolled his bicycle onto the wharf he would have avoided being thrown into the river and he would not have drowned. Jimmy could swim but he was unconscious when he entered the river. If you are a swimmer who thinks that you do not need to wear a lifejacket while boating remember what happened to Jimmy. You too might be unconscious entering the water. We are primarily responsible for our own safety. Many do not understand or accept this responsibility.

If the young man had stopped swimming he would have been rescued by the lifeguard.

I would stand at the young man's grave and ask why he did not stop swimming and get no answer. Following my research into why swimmers drown I believe that I can now answer my own question – 55 years after the event.

When we find ourselves in crisis situations, if we have no previous experience or training in crisis situations, we can sometimes fixate on one course of action. Swimmers in difficulty can fixate on swimming as fast as possible to the nearest exit point. Some can run out of oxygen before reaching safety, experience Sudden Total Swim Failure and submerge losing consciousness.

I believe that because the young man started out swimming after the ball, when he got into difficulty he fixated on reaching it, possibly thinking if only he could reach it, he could hold on to it, and use its buoyancy to keep himself on top of the water. He overlooked the fact that we have within our bodies' sufficient buoyancy to stay on top of the water - if we float. The self survival message in drowning situations from The Lifesaving Foundation's I Am Not Drowning Project is to float on the back first, slow down breathing, and only when a swimmers breathing has regularised itself should swimming to safety be considered.

In Ireland our drowning figures are low. One reason for this is that in our cities local communities have formed drowning prevention and rescue organisations. Citizens have taken ownership of their own community's water safety. We can be considered slow learners in drowning prevention as taking ownership of a community's safety was first done 250 years ago in Amsterdam by the founding members of Maatschappij tot Redding van Drenkelingen.

On behalf of The Lifesaving Foundation I salute the founders of Maatschappij tot Redding van Drenkelingen for taking ownership of water safety in Amsterdam in 1767, I salute their children and grandchildren for continuing the work of their fathers and grandfathers, and I salute you, their successors, present here today.

Het is een eer om vandaag samen met u het tway hundred fiefte jarig bestaan van de Maatschappij tot Redding van Drenkelingen te vieren.

Thank you.

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