

Save Yourself

Get ready for a summer without lifeguards.

BY **DAVE MCKENNA**

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Say you find yourself stuck at the bottom of the deep end this summer, with nobody diving in to drag your increasingly lifeless body to the surface and suck all that community pool water from your lungs. And, as you head to the hereafter, you're looking for somebody to blame.

Start with Lou Dobbs. But save some hate for American foreign policy and the euro. Oh, and David Hasselhoff.

They've all helped make it tough to keep lifeguard chairs full this year.



Search and Rescue: Pool owners can't find enough lifeguards, thanks to new visa laws.
(Darrow Montgomery)

As the swimming season opened over Memorial Day weekend, area pool managers were facing the most severe lifeguard-supply shortage in memory—perhaps the worst ever, says Amy Kroloff of Century Pools.

“This is definitely the most challenging year I’ve ever seen,” says Kroloff, whose Kensington-based employer manages hundreds of community, apartment, and condo pools on the East Coast and is the biggest such manager in the D.C. market. “I’ve heard it was hard in the 1980s, but I wasn’t around for that. We thought we had the problems figured out.”

At some point during that last drought, Century and other large-scale pool management firms figured out they could no longer depend simply on American butts to fill the lifeguard chairs. Kids here started deciding jobs at the mall were better than those at the pool. And summer school went from a place reserved for unmotivated dirtballs taking remedial English to a hangout for responsible youngsters—good lifeguard stock—looking for college prep.

And, pool folks had to admit, lifeguarding had attained a rather shlocky stigma.

“*Baywatch* didn’t help us, I’ll tell you that,” says Hank Lavery, a pools lifer.

Lavery's career got going in 1975, when he was 15 years old and took his lifeguarding job at Brinkley Towers, an apartment complex in Oxon Hill. He spent a few decades in pool management in the area and now operates Millennium Pools, a pool-service company based in Northern Virginia.

"This was a great job when I was a kid," he says. "Everybody wanted to be a lifeguard. But that was when kids had their summers off, no summer school, no internships—when we put our kids in the sun and let them enjoy the summer. Now, we don't let them in the sun, everybody's in summer school, and there's a lot more pools. It's impossible to keep them all guarded."

So in the 1990s, Lavery, like other pool managers, began depending on young foreigners, who found the prospect of being an American lifeguard far more intriguing than domestic counterparts. (Hasselhoff, the troubled former *Baywatch* hunk, was always bigger in Germany than he was here, remember.)

While so many sectors of U.S. industry were outsourcing jobs, the summer recreation field became dependent on foreign labor.

And, by focusing on international hiring efforts, the companies got by. At the end of the last century, Century Pools established an office dedicated to recruiting foreign workers. For the last four years, Kroloff has run that branch of the company's business.

The jobs gave foreigners an opportunity to make some money, then go back to their homes around the globe full of tales of summer fun like those the Beach Boys used to export to the world.

By 2006, Century was bringing about 1,000 foreign workers into the United States to work at its swimming pools for the season.

But a lot of those folks either aren't welcome or don't find lifeguarding in America as dreamy anymore. Kroloff says the company will be lucky to have 600 foreign workers this year.

The most recent and devastating hit to the foreign lifeguard pipeline came courtesy of the anti-immigrant movement in the States, figureheaded by the thinking man's white supremacist, CNN's Lou Dobbs.

The H-2B visa, a temporary work visa program that allowed overseas workers to keep our waters safe while summering in America, has been all but killed off. The category was set up by the U.S. State Department to provide workers for seasonal, non-agricultural industries that would be left shorthanded if only domestic labor were available.

There is a quota of 66,000 new H-2B visas each year, but historically returning workers weren't counted against the current year's cap. So if companies were able to find a good worker, they could bring him or her back each year.

But the H-2B cap exclusion provision expired in October 2007, and by then it was already caught up in the immigration debate. Lavery started a Web site, savesmallbusiness.org, that served as a clearinghouse for information about the H-2B and lobbied for congressional relief.

But, with Dobbs and others stoking the xenophobic fires night after night after night on national television, there weren't enough congressmen willing to be seen as pro-foreigner to get the provision

renewed. Sen. Barbara Mikulski of Maryland, one of the few vocal H-2B supporters, introduced a measure to extend the cap provision and inserted it into the Iraq War funding bill considered by the Senate. Mikulski's main concern wasn't lifeguarding but the seafood industry in her state: For years, most of the folks who pick your crabmeat on the Eastern Shore have been imported Mexicans.

But last week, Mikulski's amendment was knocked out of the bill. The debate is over. The H-2B program was essentially dead.

"That was our last hope," says Kroloff.

So, for 2008, a total of 66,000 visas will be issued—a number small enough to make the entire program almost worthless. Century Pools had 300 workers with H-2B visas last year.

This year, it will have none.

Geo Bacharov, a Bulgarian, was among the wide-eyed imports brought here by Century Pools during the salad days of imported lifeguards. He was a guard and manager at several community pools in the region, including Manchester Farms and Churchill Village South in the Germantown area, each summer from 2001 through 2007.

"I liked the U.S. a lot," writes Bacharov. "I will always feel it part of me."

A part of his past, that is. My interview with Bacharov was conducted via e-mail from his hometown of Varna, a Bulgarian city of 450,000 on the Black Sea. Despite a fabulous endorsement from his employer, he wasn't given a visa to return this year.

So the foreign workers on Century Pools roster this year will come via student visas, which, because they allow shorter stays and are reserved only for younger and less experienced lifeguards, aren't as helpful to employers as the H-2Bs.

And, Kroloff found during her world travels, foreign students are far tougher to come by than they once were. Beyond the visa conundrums, kids from formerly fertile lifeguard turf such as Eastern Europe aren't as wide-eyed about America since the invasion of Iraq and the brutal beating the U.S. dollar has suffered from just about every foreign currency out there.

And, even with the downturn in the U.S. economy, American kids still aren't looking to return to lifeguarding.

"So many of the domestic kids we brought in this year couldn't swim the 300 yards or get bricks off the bottom of the deep end—the Red Cross tests you've got to pass to get certified," says Kroloff. "This could be a real problem."

Lavery says his 15-year-old daughter just completed the required lifesaving courses and immediately found a job paying \$9 an hour lifeguarding in Northern Virginia.

"I used to get \$3 an hour," he says. "If you have any experience, I've heard you can make \$15. The demand is crazy."

But while the pool industry picked up Lavery's daughter, it's losing an employee, too. On Friday, the day after Mikulski's amendment was wiped out, Kroloff quit her job at Century.

She says the immigration debate left her "beaten down." She didn't leave lightly.

"I've been to 50 countries as a proud American, recruited internationals all over the world to bring them here either to work or study and experience our culture," Kroloff says. "Ironically, my government, my country won't allow this opportunity, legally, to work and travel, and I'm telling you that the American dream that was so strong even years ago is fading fast. It's the complete antithesis of public diplomacy."

Kroloff doesn't have another job lined up.