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Swim instructor Kurt Billing dies at 47

By [Brendan O'Reilly](#)
 Feb 10, 09 5:38 PM



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Kurt Hilding Billing, a mainstay in Southampton known for teaching hundreds—perhaps thousands—of local children over the years how to swim at Big Fresh Pond, local beaches and in backyard pools, took his own life on February 3 at his home in North Sea. He was 47.

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Mr. Billing suffered from Lyme disease for the past 10 years, the symptoms of which can include severe depression and confusion. He had been symptom free for years, but late last fall he had a relapse, his family said.

Born on January 24, 1962, Mr. Billing was known by many as "Nature," a nickname picked up during his high school years that followed him throughout life. He graduated from Southampton High School in 1980 and went on to earn a business degree from

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the University of Richmond in Virginia.

After college, Mr. Billing spent a couple years traveling the country and did a stint as a computer salesman in Washington. When he returned home to Southampton in 1986, he took over the family swimming instruction business from his sister, Donna Billing, who had taken it over from their mother, Florence. Florence Billing, who started the business more than 40 years ago, passed it to her children so she could open four women's clothing stores—Billing's Lingerie, Billing's Country Shop, Billing's Bridal Salon and Lady Billing, all in Southampton Village—which Mr. Billing helped manage, but are now all closed.

Mr. Billing learned to swim while tagging along at his mother's swimming classes. He could swim all the way across Big Fresh Pond and back when he was just 6 years old, his sister, Diane McGann, recalled on Monday.

"You could tell it was a passion, and he was just so good at it," Ms. McGann said. "He knew how to read a student, and he knew just how far to push to get results. ... It built up their self-esteem."

Most of the swimming classes were held at the same Billing-family lakefront property on Big Fresh Pond where his mother had first given lessons.

"He was a strong believer in teaching at the lake," Ms. McGann said. She explained that he wanted new swimmers to learn to be comfortable swimming long distances in open water.

"Along with so many other families, my three children all learned to swim, and to be good sportsmen and women, with Kurt Billing at Fresh Pond," Grethe Holby Elgort, a part-time Southampton resident, said this week. "I often swam the lake alongside the groups, and for many hours upon hours sat up on the lawn watching the incredible lessons going on down below. Not only lessons in swimming, but self preservation, safety, goal setting, pushing oneself to explore one's full potential—in terms of life, not in terms of being the best swimmer, or an Olympic swimmer, but in terms of personal accomplishment."

"He was more than a 'swim instructor.'" Donna Billing's husband, Alex Oliva, said. "He took it to the highest degree."

Mr. Billing's catch phrase was "Keep up the good work," and he didn't just say it to his students. Ms. Billing said he would say that to her every time they ended a phone conversation.

Ms. McGann and Ms. Billing said their brother had a "big kid" personality, taking after their late father, Hilding "Hank" Billing.

"He had this huge enthusiasm and excitement for life," Ms. Billing said of her brother. She said every outing together, whether it be hiking or ice skating, was a grand event. "He just made it like the biggest adventure in the world."

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Mr. Billing had a passion for travel. He had been to all 50 states, South Africa, Australia, Nepal and the Scandinavian countries, including Sweden, where he visited relatives. He was also an avid photographer and documented his journeys. "He has a huge collection of slides, which he enjoyed sharing with his friends and family," Ms. Billing said.

Mr. Billing was also a preservationist. He got his start at 24 years old, when he took out a \$25,000 personal loan to help preserve an \$85,000 1-acre parcel on Big Fresh Pond that he brought to the attention of the Peconic Land Trust.

"That was really inspiring for a young person to devote that kind of money," Peconic Land Trust President John v.H. Halsey said Monday.

Mr. Billing became a member of the Peconic Land Trust's stewardship committee and fought to preserve Tuckahoe Woods in North Sea.

"He knew that part of North Sea like the back of his hand," Mr. Halsey said. "He spent a lot of time as a boy running through those woods."

Mr. Billing also served on the boards of the Group for the South Fork, the Southampton Trails Preservation Society and the Southampton Town Trails Advisory Committee.

1 [2](#) [Next Page »](#)

Reader Comments



Feb 10, 09 9:41 AM
Originally Posted: Feb 6, 09 9:29 AM

This is unbelievable to hear...I am able to swim because of him. I used to cry to my parents that I didn't want to go (I hated the lake) but he was always such a nice man and I am sad to hear about his passing. [report as inappropriate](#)

MadisonsMom (Center Moriches)

Total comments by MadisonsMom: [2](#)



Feb 10, 09 9:42 AM
Originally Posted: Feb 6, 09 10:48 AM

Kurt was a pleasure to spend time with. We will miss the moonlit bar-be-ques at Cow Neck Beach. Running into him was a bright spot in a busy day; he would always stop to chat. [report as inappropriate](#)

MaudeB. (Southampton)

Total comments by MaudeB.: [2](#)



Feb 10, 09 9:44 AM
Originally Posted: Feb 6, 09 11:41 AM

Devastating news. Huge loss for our community. Big fresh pond won't be the same. My thoughts with his family. [report as inappropriate](#)

Stevens (Sagaponack)

Total comments by Stevens: [2](#)



Feb 10, 09 9:45 AM
Originally Posted: Feb 6, 09 1:56 PM

Our hearts break for him. Nature will be sorely missed. Truly the kindest man we ever met. [report as inappropriate](#)

jpk (Remsenburg)

Total comments by jpk: [2](#)



Feb 10, 09 9:46 AM
Originally Posted: Feb 6, 09 4:01 PM

This is so sad. My boys spent part of every summer for the last 7 years swimming with Kurt in Big Fresh Pond. I can't imagine a summer without his voice booming out over the pond. [report as inappropriate](#)

Anne P (Southampton)

Total comments by Anne P.: [2](#)



Feb 10, 09 9:48 AM
Originally Posted: Feb 6, 09 9:50 PM

Kurt was an amazing person. I spent about 10 summers with him between lessons in the pond and ones at the ocean. He always pushed you to the limit and wanted you to do your best. He will be greatly missed. [report as inappropriate](#)

roxy2885 (sag harbor)

Total comments by roxy2885: [2](#)



Feb 10, 09 9:49 AM
Originally Posted: Feb 8, 09 9:40 AM

Always a warm smile and a kind word...that's what I will remember [report as inappropriate](#)

cioci01 (Jupiter)

Total comments by cioc101: [2](#)

Feb 10, 09 9:50 AM
Originally Posted: Feb 9, 09 10:00 AM



It's hard to find the words to sum up the loss of this wonderful person. [report as inappropriate](#)

Katherine (Hampton Bays)
Total comments by Katherine: **8**



Feb 10, 09 1:56 PM
gut wrenching sad story. the guy seems core / the type that single handedly gives the area its credibilty versus all the dushe bags who give it a bad name. man i feel like killin myself with all the freakig mistakes ive made, but this bumms me out so much i dont dare...i hope i am 1/2 the person this guy was. respects to the family. [report as inappropriate](#)

david h (southampton)

Total comments by david h: **1**



Feb 10, 09 2:02 PM
No one can take his place. The lake will miss its guardian, and so will all of us. [report as inappropriate](#)

genie1 (New York)

Total comments by genie1: **1**



Feb 10, 09 9:29 PM
This tragedy is heart-breaking. A man with such a big heart with so much to give...A little slice of paradise could be found with Kurt and his pond. The peaceful serenity mixed with splashing children and a resounding "Ready, set goooooo!" will continue to echo over Big Fresh Pond's waters always. Our summers were a little bit richer, a little bit sunnier (even on the rainiest days), and a little bit more complete with Kurt in them. Our planet has lost one of its true knights and our children have lost the best teacher both in swimming and life! We will miss him always. [report as inappropriate](#)

queen of hearts (Hampton Bays)

Total comments by queen of hearts: **1**



Feb 11, 09 12:37 PM
I will miss one of the greatest smiles! Kurt was one of kind. [report as inappropriate](#)

falcon1977 (Southampton)

Total comments by falcon1977: **1**



Feb 11, 09 7:47 PM
The Lyme community is saddened to hear of another life lost in their ranks. The tip of Long Island is the epicenter of this hidden epidemic, with almost 100 percent infection rate in the ticks. The depression caused by Lyme infection in the brain, the lack of acceptance of the disease, the difficulty finding a doctor to treat it, the lack of consensus on how to treat it, the debility - all are hard for sick people to bear. We used to publish Lyme obituaries in the Lyme Times, but quit because our readers found it too depressing. About half the deaths were suicides.

Our sympathy to the family and friends of this wonderful human being. [report as inappropriate](#)

Phyllis Mervine (Ukiah)

Total comments by Phyllis Mervine: **1**



Feb 15, 09 2:01 PM
I did not know him very well but well enough to exchange hellos and other conversation. He was a great person with a great smile and always a hello. He will be missed by his family, friends and the community. My sincerest condolences to his family. [report as inappropriate](#)

localgirl (southampton)

Total comments by localgirl : **2**

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