

My Story: Swimming Upstream: The Cost of Speaking Up in a Culture of Silence

The smell of chlorine has always been my perfume. As the story goes, at the age of one I got away from my mother during my older brother's swim practice. Fully clothed, I sprinted towards the pool where I proceeded to jump in and had to be rescued by the head coach of my brother's swim team. After that day I was enrolled in swim lessons, and my love for the water was born. I started on my first swim team at the age of 4 and swam competitively year round until I graduated from high school. In 1995, I started to be a lifeguard at the Ashburn Village Sports Pavilion as this is where I was swimming for their year round team (then named The Ashburn Village Swim Team) and their summer swim team (Aqua Jets). In 1996 I started to teach swim lessons, and that is where my real love for the sport began. All through high school, I taught swim lessons. All through college, I taught swim lessons. All through graduate school and working a full time Government Contracting job, I taught swim lessons. I went on to have 4 children, and would teach swim lessons PAST my due date, and be back in the water teaching six weeks later. That is how much true passion I have for teaching swim lessons!

In 2016 I saw the need for a change in how the swim lessons were being managed at the Ashburn Village Sports Pavilion. Wet from the pool, in sweats, and with a toddler in tow I went to present my "idea" to the General Manager of the Ashburn Village Sports Pavilion, along with executives from our management company WTS International (now Arch Amenities Group). From 2016 until now I was able to take a program from teaching only a few hundred children a year, to creating a thriving learn to swim program and creating a developmental swim team where we now have thousands of swimmers come through our door and into our pool each month. However, it didn't stop there. I took over management of our summer swim team, Aqua Jets (who competes in the Red Division of the Colonial Swim League) and have helped them to be the Red Division champions 3 times. Right before COVID hit, I stepped in to also take over management of our year round competitive swim team, Blue Wave, and in 2023 also made the leap to be a USA Swimming Certified swim team coach for the team.

I poured my life into this place—often working 80-hour weeks because I *wanted* to. I believed in our mission.

But in 2024, that belief was tested in ways I could never have imagined.

When planning a trip to the American Swimming Coaching Association (ASCA) World Clinic—a trip I advocated for, planned, and organized—I booked airline tickets for our coaches, using their legal names as required by the airlines. One coach, who is transgender and had not legally changed their name, filed an HR complaint against me for sharing this legal name with the team. This was not an act of malice—it was an administrative task. I wholeheartedly believed I had done no wrong, but I was forced to send an apology email regarding this oversight. But from that point forward, I was labeled. Not as the leader who built a program from the ground up, but as someone who couldn't be trusted to lead in today's "inclusive" culture.

That's the word they used—*inclusive*—as if disagreeing with poor job performance equates to discrimination. But loving what you do doesn't shield you from being silenced, scapegoated, or cast aside in the name of performative inclusivity.

When I raised performance concerns about this coach, those concerns were ignored. Because they had filed a complaint, they were protected. I was not. My every action from that point was dissected, reframed, and reported. I was no longer the passionate swim instructor who built the program—I was the problem. Ultimately, I was given two options: leave quietly, or be terminated on the spot. I chose to finish out my days with dignity. Until that was taken from me, too—terminated in the middle of coaching a swim meet, informed by a parent, not management.

This situation isn't just a case of miscommunication. It's a sobering reflection of the reality many professionals now face: where identity politics override merit, intention is disregarded, and speaking up is punished. I have no issue whatsoever with anyone's gender identity. I do, however, take issue with being silenced, discarded, and replaced by someone who did not—and could not—deliver the standard I built.

I was asked to train this same employee before leaving. The irony would be laughable if it weren't so painful.

So now, I find myself in unfamiliar territory: on the outside of something I gave my life to build. But here's the truth—my passion for swimming, for teaching, and for building meaningful programs cannot be fired, silenced, or erased. They may have taken my title, but they will never take my purpose.

This wasn't just unfair—it was *wrong*. And if speaking that truth makes me unpopular in today's climate, then so be it. I'd rather stand in truth than sink in silence.

Because no matter how deep I've been pushed down, I will rise. And when I do, I will swim harder than ever before. #KristinaWontSink #archamenitiesgroup #aag