



Clockwise from top left: Stay-Focused board member Trisha Yurochko, intern Janessa Prendergast, participants Matt Giardino and Dan Suero, Dr. Casey O'Donnell, participants Emily Clarke, Sam Greenburg and Emma Albert and mentor Ryan Chalmers.



Stay-Focused intern Janessa Prendergast gives the 'OK' sign while diving.

Program for disabled teens teaches more than just diving

BY KELSEY JUKAM

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It's a sunny Sunday morning in Grand Cayman, and a group of teenagers decked out in scuba gear are in the sea pool at Sunset House, excitedly pointing out colorful fish and a conch shell or two as they wait for instructors to take them through some of the skills they must master in just a few days to earn their dive certification.

Watching them in the water, observers would not immediately realize there is something special about this group, until the abandoned wheelchairs, forearm crutches and leg braces the kids have left on the concrete platform are spotted.

In the water, they don't need them.

For the past 12 years, an organization called Stay-Focused has been bringing teenagers with disabilities from the United States to Grand Cayman to teach them how to scuba dive. "Stay focused" is also the group's mantra.

"At the end of the day, the program is really about empowering teens with disabilities to challenge themselves to get out of their comfort zone, and to realize ... if they stay focused and they're disciplined that they can achieve whatever they want to achieve," said Roger Muller, the organization's founder and president. "It's a program of empowerment."

Mr. Muller was inspired to start the program after diving in Grand Cayman with his brother, who is a paraplegic as a result of an injury from when he was in the Marines during the Vietnam War. He saw how much his brother enjoyed being out of his wheelchair, and he realized that while people with disabilities are often excluded from participating in many physical activities, scuba could be an ideal activity for them. Further, Mr. Muller said, since a dive certification is something even most able-bodied teens don't have, it gives the kids in the program certain "bragging rights."

Mr. Muller decided to launch Stay-Focused in Cayman since he learned to dive here himself, and it ended up being the ideal location for such an endeavor. The water is warm; the currents are calm, which makes it easier for participants, all of whom rely on the use of their arms, to maintain stability; and the dive sites are close to shore. (Some of the participants have medical conditions which require that they return to their hotel room every four hours.)

Each summer, a new group of kids, typically ranging in age from 13 to 17, takes part in the six-day program. They are invited to return the following summer for a reunion and to have another opportunity to dive.

To date, 82 young people have earned their dive certification through Stay-Focused.

Before being invited to participate in the program, an evaluation is conducted to ensure they are able to complete both the academic and physical components of the dive course. They are also evaluated to ensure that they can travel and stay in a hotel room on their own, since parents are not allowed to accompany them.

Participants stay at the Marriott resort and spend their mornings learning how to dive with instructors from Red Sail. In the afternoons, they tour the island above the water — this year they visited the Turtle Farm and took a helicopter ride.

The group's mentor, 26-year-old Ryan Chalmers, who has been involved with Stay-Focused for more than a decade, dived with the group again this year.

Mr. Chalmers, who was born with spina bifida and does not have complete use of his legs, competed as a member of Team USA in track and field events at the Paralympic Games in London in 2012.

The next year, he propelled his racing wheelchair across America, from Los Angeles to New York City, to raise public awareness for the potential of all people with disabilities and

to help create an endowment for Stay-Focused.

Mr. Chalmers, who has been helping Mr. Muller run the organization for the past four years, recently decided to take time off from competitive racing to dedicate even more time to working with Stay-Focused. He said a documentary and a book are in the works.

Mr. Chalmers said the organization taught him how to be a leader, and he hopes to help develop and encourage leadership skills in the children who go through the program.

"When I became a mentor, I saw the change in the kids," Mr. Chalmers said. "It's a pretty magical moment when you're sitting there on the last day and see the smiles on these kids' faces. Water is getting into their mask because they're smiling so much. And maybe they came in on day one shy, maybe they've never been away from a parent before, and you're able to see them growing up, and it's only in six days that that happens."

Internship program

In an effort to involve more local young people in the organization, Stay-Focused launched its Caymanian internship program last year. The program gives promising local high school students the opportunity to learn how to dive and to experience what it's like to work with kids with special needs.

Two interns from Clifton Hunter High School, Trent Jackson and Ricardo Martinez, participated in the program last summer and returned this summer to dive again with the reunion trip participants.

This year's intern was Janessa Prendergast, a 15-year-old who will be starting her A-level course work at St. Ignatius this fall. She was thrilled to learn how to dive, and to experience a part of her country that she had never seen before.

"I was not aware of the beauty of the ocean. I'd never gone to a reef before," Janessa said. "It's like an entirely new world out there, and I think

that we really need to protect it. It's really beautiful."

Janessa, who hopes to become a lawyer specializing in children and family law, was also excited to be involved with Stay-Focused.

"I like helping people, I like kids," she said. "If there's a chance I can make a kid's life better, helping with a problem, I want to do that."

Mr. Muller, who was impressed by Janessa's maturity, thinks she will be an excellent ambassador for the program.

"She's really outgoing, and we wanted interns who would spread the word about what it's like to work with kids with disabilities," he said.

Janessa has worked with children at her church's Vacation Bible School summer program for the last three years, but this was her first experience working with disabled kids. What she discovered this week working with the teens at Stay-Focused was that more often than not, they really did not need much help.

"They know what they can do and they're comfortable in their own skin," she said.

Janessa also learned something about herself.

"I'm stronger than I thought I was," she said. "I'm realizing that I can do so much more. Now that I know about this — I've got an able body, as we call it here, so why shouldn't I put myself in positions to help people? So this has just been like, what can you do for others? And I'm loving it. I'm loving it so much."

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