

Stay-Focused intern learns diving, disability awareness

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Despite growing up in one of the Caribbean's premier dive destinations, Jaeda Kirchman, 15, did not spend much time exploring Grand Cayman's waters.

Like many of her classmates at Clifton Hunter High School, she mainly stuck to activities on land and ventured out for an occasional ocean swim with family.

After completing a week-long dive internship with New York-based charity Stay-Focused, Jaeda has a new perspective about ocean life. She now hopes to become a divemaster. This fall she will begin studying at the University College of the Cayman Islands, where she plans to pursue a marine biology degree.

"Most of the people I know in Grand Cayman, they don't really go out in the water like that, which is kind of funny when you think about it because they are surrounded by water. They are mostly land lovers," she said.

"When we finally did go out in the ocean, I was a little scared because this isn't usually the depth of water I would go in. I would usually stay in the shallows. But it was amazing because there is a whole world under there. You see it on TV and it's not the same. You can't compare it."

Jaeda is the sixth intern to finish her introduc-



Returning intern Keanu Oliver, Stay-Focused Director Ryan Chalmers and intern Jaeda Kirchman finished the summer dive program this month.

- PHOTO: KAYLA YOUNG

tory dive certification since Stay-Focused began its Caymanian internship program in 2014. As Jaeda learned from the program, she also had the opportunity to teach others, said director Ryan Chalmers.

In addition to training Caymanian students, Stay-Focused also teaches individuals with disabilities how to dive.

Interns are partnered with new, disabled divers during the week-long course. The divers room together at the Marriott resort and as-

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sist each other through the learning process.

Mr. Chalmers said the partnership creates an extra educational component for participants.

"They learn disability awareness throughout the

week. We don't ask them to do too many other things besides learn how to scuba dive and get acquainted with the group so they can start to learn," Mr. Chalmers said.

"Our participants add the disability awareness factor

that goes along with it. That's what we wanted to achieve here, to get them out here and get ambassadors for the disability population here on the island."

Mr. Chalmers, who learned to dive with Stay-Focused as a teenager, said diving can be a freeing experience for people with disabilities. Cayman's warm weather and calm waters provide ideal conditions for many disabled divers, he added.

"It's an opportunity to feel just like everybody else," Mr. Chalmers said.

"People start to open up a little bit more about themselves, about their backgrounds. You can learn a little bit more when you start to get comfortable with one another. I think scuba diving is a perfect segue to do that."

Return intern Keanu Oliver, 18, said the opportunity to work with disabled divers opened his eyes and motivated him.

Keanu, who finished the dive internship last summer, took on a leadership role this year. In addition to refreshing his dive skills, he moved wheelchairs and helped participants on and off the dive boat.

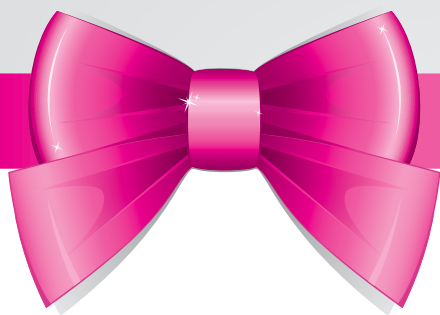
"I am more outspoken, more confident in myself now. It makes me have empathy for others to understand them. It also built my cooperation skills and team building. We get along and help each other out when we need it," Keanu said.

"When you are diving, you have to look out for others under the water just in case there is an emergency It makes you more observant and makes you more focused."

The program has opened other diving opportunities for the interns. Keanu said one local dive shop offered him an internship.

Jaeda hopes she will be able to dive with local divemasters throughout the year. She will be invited back next year, like Keanu, to take on a leadership role.

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