



Martina Burton (left) and Ashley Ebanks learned a lot and enjoyed their time in the Stay-Focused internship.



Ashley Ebanks, right, and Stay-Focused mentor Mary Kate Callahan pictured during a dive.

Young divers help out during internship at Stay-Focused

SPENCER FORDIN

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Ashley Ebanks and Martina Burton are turning their passion for the water into a potential career.

Ms. Ebanks and Ms. Burton, both 16 years old, have spent time this summer diving and working for the Central Caribbean Marine Institute, and they recently served a one-week internship with Stay-Focused in which they worked at assisting physically disabled divers earn their dive certification.

Stay-Focused, a New York-based charity helmed by Roger Muller, is celebrating its 15th anniversary this year. It has brought dozens of people to Cayman for the purpose of learning to dive. Since 2014, Stay-Focused has also helped young Cayman

divers interested in earning their own certification.

Ms. Ebanks and Ms. Burton were already certified divers, but they donned the wet suits and air tanks willingly this summer to assist in instructing a whole new class of divers.

"I loved the week. It was a very good experience," said Ms. Burton. "It was all worth it. It was so encouraging to see people with physical disabilities just go out there and experience new things they've never experienced before. The look on their faces when they went into the water was amazing."

Both Ms. Ebanks and Ms. Burton are about to start their education at the University College of the Cayman Islands, and they will continue working at CCMi on weekends once school begins.

Ms. Burton said she would like to be a marine biologist some day, and Ms. Ebanks said she began to consider a career in the water after having so much fun assisting the divers with Stay-Focused.

"It's an awesome feeling to know that you have this one little bit of an advantage, and this person can accomplish just as much as you can with just an extra little push," she said. "And to know that you can be the one to help them accomplish what they're trying to achieve, it's just an amazing feeling."

Mr. Muller, who has been bringing aspiring divers to Cayman since 2004, was hoping to inspire that exact emotion. He started Stay-Focused after watching his brother, a Marine Corps combat veteran who uses a wheelchair, get a scuba-

diving certification relatively late in life.

Cayman, said Mr. Muller, holds a special place in his heart because it is where he learned to dive. But he keeps on coming back because it's also the perfect environment for disabled divers to learn.

"Cayman offers the ideal diving destination," he said. "We need water that's consistently warm, which is what you have in Cayman. Warm water is beneficial to anyone with any form of paralysis. We need dive sites that are close to shore, because we can't spend a lot of time getting to dive sites and back.

"We want clear water and we don't want to dive in an environment where there's current. If there's current, divers would struggle against it and use more air, therefore the dive times would be

shorter. And in the unlikely event we need medical attention, the facilities here in Cayman are excellent."

Ms. Ebanks, a former John Gray High School student, and Ms. Burton, who studied at Clifton Hunter High School, said they learned a lot by being in the water and helping others find their comfort level.

Ms. Ebanks said she learned techniques over the last couple of weeks to help with her anxiety when underwater, and she hopes that on some level she was a help to the novice divers learning the ropes.

"It's really inspiring to see them get into the water and out of their comfort zone and accomplish something you'd never think they can accomplish," she said of helping the divers.

"You get scared like you might do something wrong and harm them. But they know exactly what they're doing. If you just motivate them a little bit and help them where they need help, it gets really simple."

For Ms. Burton, who began free diving with her father before learning to scuba dive, the week was really a reiteration of what she has always known. She said she has hoped to have a career on the water ever since she was a little girl, and assisting divers let her know that she's on the right track.

"I'm very proud of them, because they're stepping out of their comfort zone to do something they've been dreaming to do," she said. "It's good to know I've helped them get to what they want to achieve."



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