

The Stay-Focused divers  
on a dive off Seven Mile  
Beach on Sunday,  
14 Aug. - Photos: Norma Connolly



# Stay-Focused divers with disabilities back in the water



Stay-Focused's Ryan Chalmers, with the 2022 Caymanian interns, from left, Jason Ricketts, Valentina Bustos and Marcus Lagman.

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The sea is dead calm as the Red Sail dive boat pulls out from Seven Mile Beach and the divers check their gear and get ready to head underwater.

For this group, it's not just a matter of sorting out their dive bags and replacing their sunglasses with scuba masks; these divers are also putting away their wheelchairs, prosthetic limbs and crutches before strapping air tanks to their backs.

They're with Stay-Focused, a US-based charity that empowers teens and young people by teaching them to dive in the Cayman Islands.

These 10 divers are the third of three groups to dive here over consecutive weeks. They're the 'reunion' group, and it's their second time on island, having learned to dive here in 2019. They were supposed to return in 2020, but COVID scuppered that plan. The two groups in the previous two weeks learned to dive for the first time, and will come back next year, if all goes according to plan.

Among those on board on that calm Sunday morning, was Alicia Guerrero, 19, from Wapato, Washington, who is on the US Paralympic shot put and discus team and plays on the University of Illinois women's wheelchair basketball team.

"I had some issues with my ears at the very start, but it was just like it was

back in 2019," she said. "I was able to remember everything, especially with all the help from Stay-Focused. It was a really fun experience to be able to get back in the water again."

Alicia lost her left leg in a lawnmower accident when she was 2 years old. She dives with one fin currently, although in 2019, she dived with no fins, using a combination of kicking and swimming with arms to propel herself forward.

Most of the others in the group go barefoot or with dive booties, moving through the water with their arms. All the divers are athletes from a variety of disciplines – swimming, basketball, sled hockey, track and field – and many have impressive arm and upper body strength.

Kaela Cruz, 20, from New Jersey, said she'd missed diving, and Sunday's first dive was "really surreal" because of some of the wildlife they encountered, including a nurse shark at the Oro Verde wreck and at least two turtles.

Kaela, a cancer survivor, was diagnosed with osteosarcoma (bone cancer) just before her 5th birthday in January 2007. She underwent an above-the-knee amputation four months later. She has been cancer-free since. Now, she runs, swims, surfs, competes in triathlons – and, of course, dives.

Getting back into diving after a three-year hiatus was a "little bit" difficult, she admitted, but a refresher session in the pool at The Ritz-Carlton reminded her

of the various underwater hand signals and what to do in certain situations.

Alicia, Kaela and their fellow divers are the latest cohort of the Stay-Focused programme, which was founded by Roger Muller in 2003. Each year, COVID notwithstanding, the group brings teens from the US to Grand Cayman to introduce them to diving or refresh their skills. Ryan Chalmers, director of development, whom Muller describes as his "heir apparent" in Stay-Focused, is also a dive master who works with first-time divers or those struggling with certain skills.

Chalmers – a former Paralympic athlete who once traversed the US in his wheelchair, covering 3,320 miles in the 'Push Across America' challenge – has been involved with Stay-Focused since 2005, when he took part in the diving programme at 15 years old after being introduced to Muller at a junior nationals meet where he was competing.

"Roger asked me if I wanted to dive, and I said, 'Sure, why not? Let's learn to dive,'" Chalmers said.

He said it's always interesting to see the reactions of the new divers as they get in the water for the first time.

"There's no one boilerplate response to that first dive," he said. "It's unique to each individual. Some love the fish. Some love the buoyancy. Some love that feeling of just flying. Some love that they were able to accomplish a skill they were