

nervous about. Or they got to see a big tarpon and reacted OK when they thought they'd be nervous.”

Under the programme, all participants begin with the PADI Scuba Diver certification, which allows them to dive at a maximum depth of 40 feet under the supervision of a professional diver. Over the years, they can progress through to higher levels.

**Caymanian interns lend helping hand**

As well as teaching youngsters from the US to dive, Stay-Focused each year takes on teenage Caymanian interns, who do the same PADI Scuba Diver course as the visitors. The interns also assist in carrying equipment and helping out the visiting divers.

This year’s interns are Valentina Bustos, 19, from John Gray High School; and Jason Ricketts, 15, and Marcus Lagman, 16, from Clifton Hunter High School.

Under the programme, each intern stays at the same hotel as the group of divers they’re working with, and their meals, dives and training are provided free of charge.

This year’s trio of interns say they have all made strong connections with the people in their dive groups.

“I’ve got a whole group chat with my buddies,” Jason said. “We’ve become very good friends.”

“Me and my roommate, we became best friends,” Marcus said.

One young diver who visited earlier this month was visually impaired, and she had very limited sight. Marcus, who was diving with her group, described a special moment for her. “We were diving at Sunset House and she got a chance to touch and feel the mermaid’s face there,” he said, “so that was a really nice experience for her.”

One of the best things about diving with the Stay-Focused visitors is getting to meet and become friends with people with disabilities, the interns said, as they don’t usually encounter them in their day-to-day lives.

Asked what challenges the interns faced when working with each group, Jason responded, “communicating with them at the start”, because he didn’t know what to expect, but within just a short while of chatting with them, “we were best buddies”.

“I guess when you meet someone for the first time, you wonder if you’re going to relate to them,” Valentina said.

Marcus agreed, saying, “Not that many people in Cayman that you see have disabilities.”

“It seems it’s kind of a stigma here, for people in wheelchairs,” Jason said. “That needs to change.”

“A lot of the people in my group are athletes,” said Valentina, who worked with the reunion group when they first learned to dive in 2019. “That really just opened my mind. They were more fit than me. It was just so nice to see that.”

Chalmers says the role of the interns is a vital one, because it opens routes to communication and challenges stigmas.



Kaela Cruz with a toy mascot she brought with her.

“There is still a stigma surrounding people with disabilities, in Cayman and in the US, and elsewhere,” he said. “It takes education and time to be able to break that stigma. There are people here on island with disabilities. So, yes, it takes time and it takes individuals like Valentina and Jason and Marcus to speak up and be an ally for the disabilities community, and to be able to have some of these conversations to help break some of this stigma.”

Chalmers added, “That’s why we wanted to start the Caymanian internship programme, so they could be ambassadors for Stay-Focused and talk about scuba diving here.”

As a person in a wheelchair himself who dives and is a dive master, he says representation is very important among people with disabilities, and that it is can be encouraging when young divers see someone else with similar disabilities achieve what they’re aiming to do.

“Representation really does matter,” Chalmers said. “We want them to be able to understand it’s about adaptation; they can be as successful as any of their peers, but to be able to feel that way, sometimes it takes representation, so they can say “This person has my disability too, and this is where they went.”



The Stay-Focused divers and crew after two successful dives on Sunday, 14 Aug. - Photo: Rob Tyler of Armada Films

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