

‘normal’. But I’m super glad that I got the opportunity, and will get more opportunities for the future to really just help out and be as positive as I can,” he said.

He said he admires the way the visitors adapt to every situation they encounter. “We all as human beings have to adapt to certain things,” he said, as he urged others to have respect for anyone with disabilities. “Don’t think that they automatically need help,” he added.

First-time divers

For Tareek and Carol-Ann, this was their first time diving and their first time with Stay-Focused.

“Every moment I got to spend with these kids has been a great experience for me. Also getting to be in the water for the first time as a scuba diver was so good. I want to be a marine biologist, so doing this was taking a big step towards me becoming one,” said Carol-Ann, who now studies at the Cayman Islands Further Education Centre.

Whether diving with a missing limb, or with spinal injuries, or with no injuries at all, for new divers, that first moment of dropping underwater, and depending on unfamiliar equipment to breathe, can be daunting.

“When I got in the water that first time, I was so scared I’d run out of air or that something might happen,” Carol-Ann said. “But the instructors were there to help me out and keep me calm.”

That experience, she said, gave her a better understanding and ability to help other divers who were having similar fears.

“Some of them were nervous at first, and I’d try to calm them down and say, ‘You can do this. Don’t give up,’” she said.

Jason added, “I feel like it’s tougher for them. Some of them have barely any use of their legs, so... have to use their arms. Some of the skills they have to do require them to use both arms, but they’ve got a lot of upper-body strength and they’re great swimmers. They face challenges and they make the best out of it.”

Tareek agreed, saying, “Never think the kids with disabilities can’t do something. Never doubt them because they can do it. They can do a lot of things that we ourselves might never be able to do.”

He said the programme had not only given him the experience of scuba diving for the first time, but had enabled him to meet new people and build up his confidence.

He has had some experience interacting with people with disabilities, as his grandmother works at the Sunrise Adult Training Centre in West Bay.

“I’d go there from time to time to help because I love helping people out. It brings joy to my heart helping people to have a good time. So, me getting to do these types of things, and learning to scuba dive and meeting new people and having these experiences has been amazing,” he said.

He’s also hoping to keep up his scuba diving. “Just like Jason, I’m thinking about going on to Open



The young divers used their arms to propel themselves through the water.

Water and Advanced,” he added.

“Seeing the coral and the little fish and everything else down there was really cool,” he said.

“Also, bonding and making friends with everyone here” were among the highlights of his time in the programme.

Before joining the programme in 2022, Jason, who will be attending the University College of the Cayman Islands this term, says he wasn’t into either swimming or snorkelling. “but I like to try new things, so when I heard diving, that sparked my interest”.

Sharing experiences

As well as diving with the visitors, the interns also share rooms with them at the hotels that offer the programme accommodation free of charge – The Ritz-Carlton, Marriott and Westin hotels. Dive operators Red Sail and Sunset House provide the diving instruction and equipment.

Each year, four Stay-Focused groups come to Cayman from the US for a week each – two are on a repeat or ‘reunion’ trip, and two new groups. Then, the following year, the new group goes on the

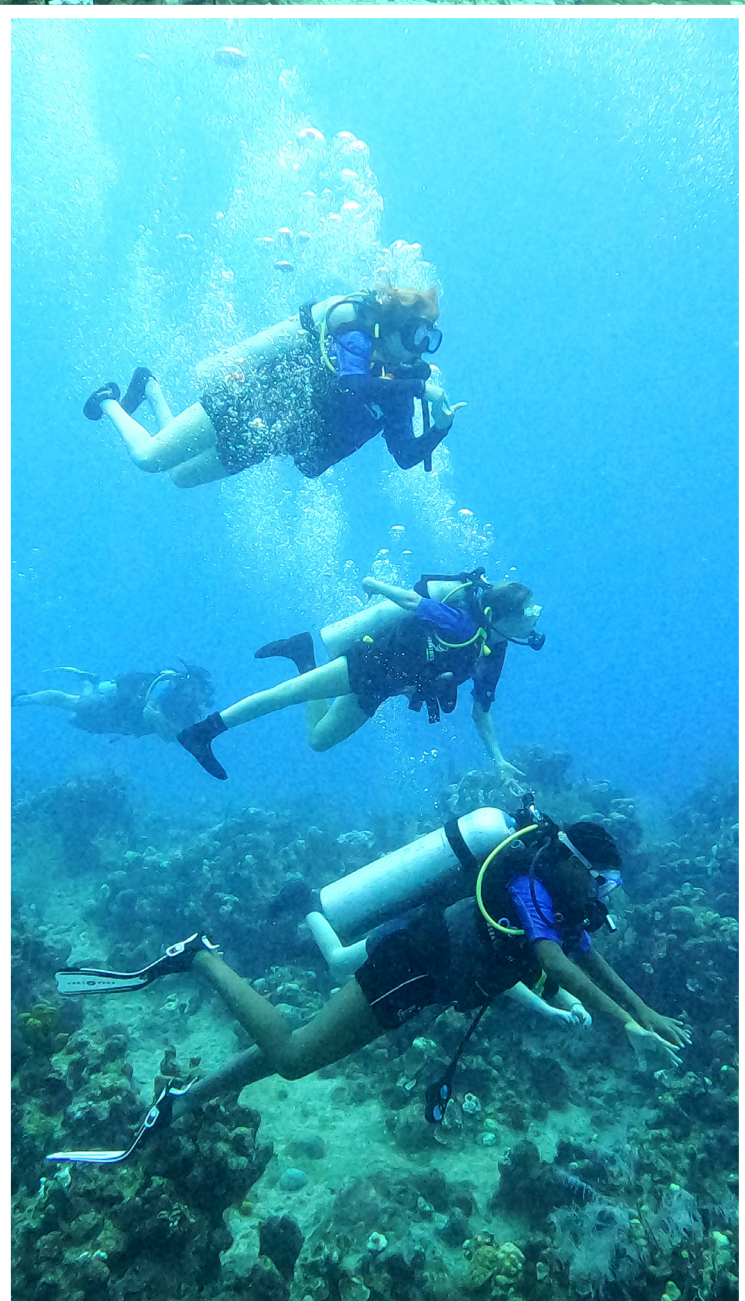
reunion trip, reuniting with interns they worked with the previous year, so next year, Carol-Ann, Tareek and Jason will get to meet up with their dive buddies again.

The programme has grown over the years. When it first started, two decades ago, just two students a week were taking part, said Muller, who was back on island this summer, along with Ryan Chalmers, who started out as a teenage participant and who is now director of the programme, and his father Gregg Chalmers, who is chief operations officer.

Muller learned to dive here in 1999, and then returned the following year with his brother who uses a wheelchair. “The dive sites were right there, there’s very little current, and great visibility, and the water is consistently warm,” he said.

He added, “We love Cayman. In 20 years, we’ve never gone anywhere else,” noting the island offers everything the programme needs – generous donors and sponsors, warm weather, calm seas and easy diving.

“There is no place else where we would get the level of support that we get here,” he said.



Each year, the Stay-Focused divers get to experience Cayman’s reefs.