

BUBBLES OF TRIUMPH

Hilliard woman with limited use of legs learns to scuba-dive

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Tammy Bellios and Dave Penter are planning a vacation next month to Honduras.

"Somewhere warm," assured Penter, a quality-control engineer who lives in Dublin.

Somewhere that Bellios, a licensed physical-therapy assistant from Hilliard, can use the open-water certification she recently earned after weeks of training at the *YMCA* pool in Urbancrest.

Somewhere she might see things more wondrous and colorful than the junked cars at the bottom of the water-filled quarry near Bowling Green where she proved she had mastered the skills needed to receive a scuba-diving card.

Not somewhere, though, that caters specifically to divers with physical disabilities.

No, thanks.

"I'm stubborn," said Bellios, who has had limited use of her legs since she suffered spinal-cord injuries 15 years ago in a car accident. "I want to go do whatever everyone else can do."

Underwater, her desire can come true.

Bellios, originally from suburban Akron, obtained her certification with the help of boyfriend Penter, who has been diving for about four years, and *YMCA* scuba instructor Andy G. Silverman.

Both men underwent training that enabled them to adapt scuba instruction to the needs of people with disabilities.

Bellios even learned how to take her mask off underwater and put it back on, then clear the water by expelling air through her nostrils.

The skill is required for diving certification, but Bellios -- like virtually every other diving trainee -- didn't much care for water running up her nose.

"It's biological. You're not supposed to breathe with water in your nose," said Jim Gatacre, founder of the Handicapped Scuba Association of San Clemente, Calif.

Through the Veterans Affairs office at the University of California, Irvine, in 1974, Gatacre -- who has only partial use of his right arm -- started adapting scuba training for people with various disabilities: blindness, cerebral palsy, amputations, paraplegia, even quadriplegia.

(The only condition that prevents a person from diving, according to the book *Scuba Diving* by Monty Hall and Miranda Krestovnikoff, is epilepsy -- "due to the risk of seizures while submerged.")

Gatacre formed the nonprofit association in 1981 and a year later, during a three-day workshop in Ohio, met representatives of the groups that offer scuba certification to establish protocols for training disabled divers.

He expected strong opposition, he said, but instead found only concern that disabled divers acquire the skills required of their counterparts without disabilities.

"The industry has always been solidly behind it," Gatacre said.

Since then, he said, about 2,000 people with physical disabilities have obtained scuba certification in the United States.

Gatacre visited Columbus during the summer as part of a charitable effort by central Ohio scuba instructors to train divers in helping disabled people learn the sport.

The previous year, Silverman -- a New Jersey native who began diving in 1987 and instructing nine years later -- had picked up a grant from the Columbus Foundation to travel to Florida and become certified in such training.

The standards of the *YMCA* program in Key Largo mirror those of the Handicapped Scuba Association.

The training, Silverman said, "gives you a new sense of awareness" -- precisely the goal, according to Gatacre.

"Welcome to our world," Bellios said.

Her world with Penter began about a year ago, when they met through a friend.

Once she expressed an interest in diving, he did some Internet research, eventually reaching the site of the association -- where he learned about the Mid-Ohio Divers raising \$1,700 to bring Gatacre to the area.

Penter signed up.

Training for Bellios -- at the Southwest Community Center -- came next.

Her biggest fear, she said, was not being able to breathe.

"When she first got into the water, she was a little timid," Silverman recalled. "We had to experiment a lot."

Fins fell off her feet, and her legs proved too weak for much propulsion underwater.

"For all intents and purposes, she couldn't kick," Silverman said.

Penter came up with the idea of webbed swimming gloves, which enabled her hands and arms to do what her feet and legs could not.

During her third night of training, Bellios got water up her nose -- and shot straight to the surface.

"The illegal pop-up," she noted with a wry grin.

A quick rise from even a relatively shallow dive might severely damage the lungs, given the rapid expansion of compressed air from the tank under the reduced atmospheric pressure.

Bobbing on the surface of the pool, with her boyfriend and her instructor both shouting at her, Bellios started to doubt her ability to dive.

Silverman, however, was seeing a level of confidence that made him think otherwise.

"After a couple of weeks, she got right into it," he said.

The training culminated in a final, successful checkout dive in September at Portage Quarry in northwestern Ohio.

Getting in and out of the water was awkward.

"I took my canes and walked . . . to knee level of water and then ditched them, sat on the sand and scooted myself into the water on my buttocks until I could stand in the water on my own," Bellios explained by e-mail.

As for the part where she had to prove she could clear her mask: A bunch of curious fish suddenly swarmed around her face, she said; she began to laugh -- and forgot to panic.

Bellios is eager to put her certification to use -- to experience the freedom of movement in the vast waters off Honduras.

"When you're under, it's completely different," she said in an interview. "It's free. I don't have cares. I don't think the average joe can understand that. I'm under control under there.

"I have a lot of people who say, 'How can you do it?' You have to go for it; that's my motto."

Kevin Parks is editor of the Grove City Record.

Illustration: Photo appeared in newspaper, not in the archive.

Photo caption: DORAL CHENOWETH III / DISPATCH PHOTOS

TOP AND ABOVE: Tammy Bellios and Dave Penter during a diving practice at the *YMCA* pool in Urbancrest