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Diving Disabled

Editor's Note: "Diving Disabled" is reprinted with permission from Scuba Times Magazine. Lenny Hulsebosch and Larry Smith are former TIRR patients. Franklin Viola is a freelance photojournalist based in Atlanta, Georgia.

By Franklin J. Viola

The cool crisp air of a cloudless December morning breathed with excitement for a young boy popping wheelies on his Stingray bicycle. Celebration occupied his thoughts as Christmas was only a week away. He was off to fuel this festive mood at a neighborhood fireworks stand (against his parent's permission but a magnet where many 13-year-olds have spent their allowance.)

The course he chose took him down a street where another young boy was in his bedroom admiring his dad's unwrapped Christmas present, a British Enfield .303 hunting rifle. The next event is all too predictable as the young boy spotted Lenny Hulsebosch approaching on his bicycle and raised the weapon to "sight in" the target. Lenny thought the loud crack was his rear tire going flat beneath his banana-seat bike. A single hollow-point bullet ruptured both his kidneys and shattered his spine.

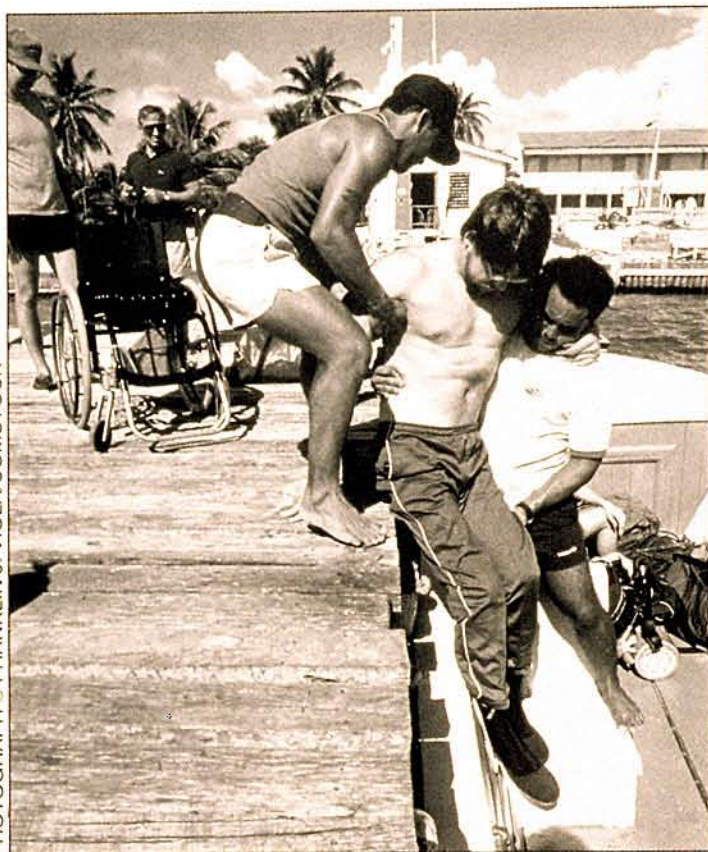
25 Years Later. . .

As Lenny hit the water from the boat above me I could not stop thinking about the nightmare he had just described and how the flame of many youthful dreams had nearly been extinguished. A strange trembling raced through my legs, limbs which had propelled me miles through swimming pools as a competitor for 12 youthful years. Slowly he descended to join me in the Hol Chan Marine Reserve off Ambergris Cay, Belize. My eyes must have been as wide as saucers because a big smile gleamed through Lenny's regulator and mask as if to signal, "I'm okay, are you okay?" Mary, his sister, an "able-bodied" diver who was encouraged to learn scuba diving after hearing Lenny's dive trip stories made our buddy team a threesome.

Embarrassed at impolitely staring into my own preconceived fear and ignorance, I fumbled to regain my wits and hurried to catch up to my buddies, one of whom was only using his arms to propel himself through the water. Observing Lenny explore the underwater world with such outward joy and confidence made me question the way society views those unable to enjoy the mobile freedom many of us take for granted.

For 17 years Lenny's life was dictated by the confinements of his wheelchair. One cannot deny that people with disabilities enjoy fulfilling and productive lives. There are many recreational activities in which those with spinal cord injuries and other disabilities may participate. Basketball, tennis, archery and even marathons are just a few of the sports actively pursued by these never-say-never individuals.

In 1983 while attending the National Wheelchair Games In Hawaii, Lenny and a friend, Larry Smith (also a person with a spinal cord injury), dared each other to discard their wheelchairs and attempt a sport considered foreign to their world - snorkeling. Instantly, they were hooked. Sea water, the elixir of all life, with its properties of buoyancy, kept Lenny and Larry from falling and allowed them to



PHOTOGRAPH © FRANKLIN J. VIOLA/COMSTOCK

Larry Smith, an accomplished diver and former TIRR patient, is helped into the boat by a Belizean dive guide.

experience an awakening from their world of confinement. After a few snorkeling trips to Cozumel, Lenny again felt restricted as he observed scuba divers down below him playing in the reefs. Determined to become a certified diver, he approached many dive shops in his hometown of Houston to register for a class. Here the walls of a society under the dictator rule of insurance liability, complicated by uneducated instructors wanting to teach students free of hassles were not crumbling down.

Persons with physical disabilities such as spinal cord injuries, amputations, impaired vision, impaired hearing, asthma, diabetes and seizure disorders come under close scrutiny by the national certifying scuba associations. Instructors may certify these physically challenged divers if they meet the certification standards of a safe diver.

Lenny was persistent and finally succeeded in convincing former Houston Scuba Academy instructor, Steve Baine, that he and Larry could meet open water certification standards set forth for all new divers. It was a learning experience for all participants, especially the instructor.

All beginning divers are in a restricted diver category until they demonstrate the ability to cope with and overcome whatever it is that causes restriction. This philosophy should cover all aspects of certification including swimming evaluations, mask clearing, buoyancy control and working the no-decompression dive tables. Each task requires the student to get from point A to point B safely and without panic. Speed and style come later with repetition and experience, which are important but are not prerequisites of certification. Because of the physical

restrictions a disabled person endures daily, it is not infrequent when a physically challenged diver teaches an instructor a different and sometimes better way to perform particular diving skills well.

For the disabled, the biggest step is to overcome the fear of the unknown and to leave the chair. Nineteen percent of spinal cord injuries are a result of sports accidents.

However, the sense of challenge and the thrill of action which led the victim to his or her involvement in adventurous activity is usually continued after injury. New ways are found to incorporate the activity back into their lives.

In many cases, the skills performed by the disabled diver are modified but never in such a manner as to undermine the standards of certification. Lenny says the equipment modifications are made to better adapt the disabled person to the water environment. From gloves with webbed fingers to special prosthetics made to hold fins (for amputees), these devices increase mobility in the water. Disabled divers have also found it advantageous to use BC's (buoyancy compensator) with light-touch power inflators, low volume masks which purge easily and most importantly, proper weighting and distribution of that weight (i.e. ankle weights in pockets, on belts and on ankles).

Upon certification, Lenny formed the Houston Disabled Scuba Divers Association (HDSDA) for people with spinal cord injury. His enthusiasm and heightened confidence have encouraged many others to discover the freedom of water. Another group is the Moray Wheels Adaptive Scuba Association of Boston. Co-founded by Gwen Garrett an occupational therapist, and Rusty Murray a NAUI/PADI instructor, the Moray Wheels began certifying through NAUI/PADI standards, divers with a wide range of disabilities in 1982. Like HDSDA the Moray Wheels actively promote public awareness of the barriers disabled people have to overcome and educate dive operators on how to make their facilities more accommodating to all divers. In the Caribbean,

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON DIVING WITH A DISABILITY:

Handicapped Scuba Association

116 W. El Portal St., Suite 104
San Clemente CA 92672

Houston Disabled Scuba Divers Association

15215 Blue Ash Drive #1101
Houston TX 77090

Moray Wheels Adaptive Scuba Association

P.O. Box 1660 GMF
Boston MA 02205

National Association for Divers with Disabilities

P.O. Box 112223
Campbell CA 95011

Ocean Escapes

3762 Costa Del Rey
Oceanside CA 92056

Dive Bonaire is very accessible to disabled divers and plans are underway to make Cayman Brae's Tiara Beach Resort 100 percent accessible. Hopefully, other resorts will follow this trend.

Californian Jim Gatacre who has limited use of one arm founded the Handicapped Scuba Association (HSA) to train instructors how to teach diving to disabled individuals. If a diver can challenge all the performance standards, he or she is awarded an A-level certification, qualifying that individual to dive in open water with a buddy. B-level certification is awarded to a diver who can perform some of the personal safety skills and is therefore required to dive with two buddies, one of whom is trained in diver rescue.

Diving associations for the disabled are much like other national diving associations. The goal to certify safe divers is one of common interest but how to manage this growing community of physically challenged divers has invited them to experience diving's political rifts. Gary Fagner and Dorothy Shrout, both HSA certified, founded Ocean Escapes and the National Instructors Association for Divers with Disabilities, respectively. While both organizations have similar certification levels as HSA, Ocean Escapes believes the medical community is being left out of HSA's program and is dedicated to the research of scuba diving as physical and psychological therapy for people with disabilities.

Upon completing our dive, Lenny had little difficulty getting back into the boat. He simply handed up his weight belt, slid out of his BC and was lifted into the boat by the two guides. Lenny is on dialysis and cannot be away from treatment for more than three days. This makes for a five day trip to Belize including dialysis treatments on days of flying. He has done what the diving associations told me was impossible.

Lenny left me with these thoughts, "Scuba diving is a whole new world. You can move around freely—you're not handicapped underwater. It's a different world—beautiful—a different dimension." Is this any different from the reason divers of all levels flock to the water like baby sea turtles? Too tired to question his wisdom, I was relieved Lenny had brought his all-terrain wheelchair with big knobby tires so he could help bring my ice-chests full of cameras up the beach.



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Using a swimming pool as a practice site, Pam Moore tests her emergency out-of-air technique (buddy breathing) with instructor Steve Baine.