

# A LIFE WITHOUT LIMITS

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Our goal has been to make adaptive diving available to people with all abilities in Dubai and we have seen people as far as London and the USA come and participate in the program. Visually impaired, muscle dystrophy, autism, amputees, even a girl that was born without legs. All of them brought together with one thing in common... the healing power of the Ocean!





The first time I met a person with a physical disability, was when I was 14 years old attending a volunteer program in Mozambique. They worked with children that got maimed by landmines that had been left after the civil war.

We spent the days on the program doing art and playing with little Mozambican kids not much younger than we were. One of the girls was called Miriam. She was about 10 years old and lost both her legs in a land mine blast. Her parents abandoned her, not being able to look after her and she was taken in by a volunteer organization working with children from war conflict affected areas.

Miriam was a quiet girl left in a catatonic state after her trauma. She never talked, she never smiled and spent her days sitting under a tree just looking into space. We spent an afternoon with her doing art, teaching her to write her name in big letters and then drawing things she loved inside the letters. We used lots of colors and paint and just enjoyed spending time with her. The woman who was in charge of the volunteer program came along and saw what we were doing and started crying. At first we thought we did something wrong and stopped what we were doing. She told us not to stop and explained that Miriam was with their program for 3 years already and this was the first time she saw her smile...

The experience really hit home because I was only a few years older than her. I remember thinking, I am also an African and that could have easily been me if there were a small difference in geography.

16 years later, I was reminded of this story when I got involved with the Palestinian Children Relief Fund (PCRF) – an organization that works with sick or injured children from conflict areas in the Middle East.

A number of amazing kids with different injuries came to participate in a diving program I set up at the Pavilion Dive Centre at the Jumeirah Beach Hotel. The program

was aimed at giving young kids from the Middle East with physical disabilities or amputations a chance to experience scuba diving while waiting to be treated as part of the PCRF's treatment program in Dubai. The reaction of the kids that came diving with us was unbelievable. To see the realization on their faces that they can move without crutches or a wheel chair was priceless. One boy in particular made a life changing impact on me. Khalil Al Jedali was 16 years old when he lost both his legs in a mortar attack. I met him not long after this life-altering episode that also claimed his 8 year old little brother. When I was told about him, I expected to meet a crushed and bitter teenager, instead

I met a young man that lit up a room when he entered. Khalil had a twinkle in his eye, and a gentle spirit, yet he was confident and self-assured in spite of how his life had changed in an instant. Scuba diving was the last thing on earth Khalil expected to do. Like the other kids that came through the program, Khalil was amazed by the new found possibilities for movement in a zero gravity environment. Learning how to dive – something that even most able-bodied people could find daunting, taught Khalil a lesson he would never forget. It wasn't how to clear a mask, or how to master his buoyancy. Learning to dive caused a paradigm shift. It made him realize he could achieve the unthinkable, achieve things that

previously he thought might have been impossible.

Today Khalil is back in Gaza. He is also back in a wheel chair. He outgrew his prosthetic legs to the stage where they simply were too painful to use. He is currently studying a business major with dreams to start his own business one day, to be able to provide for his family. He battles his way to university in his wheel chair. Some days he has a hard time functioning, like we all do. It is on days like this I would like to think that Khalil thinks back to the moments we shared under the water. Nothing but the sound of our breathing, the cool Arabian Sea wrapped around us and



the sensation of being able to move freely in zero gravity, with no restrictions...I would like to think that this is not just a distant memory, but a reminder of what he has achieved and what he can still achieve. We stay in touch with Skype. Every time we chat, we plan the next time we can get together to dive again. I know it will happen. It has to!



With the help of Fraser Bathgate, Disabled Divers International and Depththerapy's Founder, we managed to launch the Middle East's first Adaptive Diver training program as part of the Jumeirah Tawasul Adaptive Diver Program at the Pavilion Dive Centre. The program trained over 30 Adaptive Diving Instructors from different nationalities since 2010. Our goal has been to make adaptive diving available to people with all abilities in Dubai and we have seen people as far as London and the USA come and participate in the program. Visually impaired, muscle dystrophy, autism, amputees, even a girl that was born without legs. All of them brought together with one thing in common...the healing power of the Ocean!

taking dives with ConnectOcean and BA Divers, the first Adaptive Diver Training facility in Costa Rica.

The event also had two guest keynote speakers that attended the event.

Tiffany Joiner broke her back and injured her spinal cord in 2008 when she fell from her balcony in Dubai and Jennifer Bricker, an acrobat and aerialist who was born with no legs. Both women started their training as part of the Jumeirah Tawasul Adaptive Diver program in Dubai and completed their PADI Openwater training with ConnectOcean in Costa Rica as part of the "No Limits" Adaptive Diver Training Program.

done at institutions like the John Hopkins University on the positive affects of diving on PTSD and TBI (Traumatic Brain Injury) that can also occur from motor vehicle accidents. Organizations like Depththerapy in the UK, who was founded by Fraser Bathgate, has been working with patients with PTSD and TBI with some profound results. In the majority of the cases, there has been a tremendous improvement psychologically and even documented pain relief of some of their injuries. On interviewing participants of these programs, a common thread can be found. The Ocean's ability to heal...

2014 will mark a year for great collaboration in Adaptive Diving. ConnectOcean and the Jumeirah Tawasul Adaptive Diving program will be joining forces with Depththerapy to roll out an amazing project and another first of its kind in the Middle East. The "No Limits" Diving program will be extended to Dubai and we will be training up a group of UAE Paralympians to dive and embark on an Adaptive Dive Adventure to Costa Rica!

Our goal is to engage corporate commitment and sponsorship for this adventure and to document it as part of a small documentary to outline strength of the human spirit to overcome and the Ocean's amazing ability to inspire passion in the hearts of people with all abilities.

On the 27<sup>th</sup> of September, history was made with the launch of the ConnectOcean "No Limits Adaptive Diving program", the first of its kind in Costa Rica and Central America. With the support of ConnectOcean and the ICT (Instituto Costarricense de Turismo) the region's first Adaptive Diver Instructor Program was hosted at the Four Seasons Papagayo Peninsula under the instruction of Fraser Bathgate. Dale Thompson and Mike Ceci, two very experienced Instructors from the Jumeirah Tawasul Adaptive Diver Program, travelled all the way from Dubai to assist during the event. The highlight of the event was 30 Paralympic Athletes participating in a PADI Discover Scuba Diving Experience. Most of the athletes were either part of the volleyball team or swimmers, and their injuries ranged from amputations to spinal cord injuries.

Tiffany is using her experience to share and help other individuals who had to go through similar traumatic and life changing events. She was told she would never be able to walk again but in spite of this, her strong spirit has motivated her to back pack around the world where she is focusing on her writing, documenting her travels in an exciting travel blog called, "A Tale of Two Legs".

The ConnectOcean "No Limits" Adaptive Diver Training program is also collaborating with MIT in Boston. In October, I travelled to Boston as part of a rehabilitation program to train up a husband and wife couple that survived the Boston Marathon Bombing in April. A lot of survivors from traumatic life changing experiences suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Studies are being

With the help of Adaptive Diving Instructors at the Pavilion Dive Centre, a group of UAE Adventurers with physical challenges will start their adventure by completing their Openwater training before embarking on a life changing adventure to Costa Rica. The Costa Rican Paralympic Athletes will be welcoming the team for 2 weeks of adventure and diving, exploring the tropical rainforests, volcanoes and doing dives with majestic giant mantas and join our search to find the giant bull sharks of Bat Island. An Adventure to discover... connect...and protect, all part as a first step to a life without limits.

We had an amazing day on the beach playing seated volleyball, kayaking and doing breath

