

**Title** : Diving lessons for disabled performers  
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## Four learn to scuba-dive to prepare for marine-themed charity musical



NO BARRIER: Disabled divers (clockwise from left) Geeta Varatharaja, Jeffrey Soh, Hay Qing Hui and Choo Poh Choon, after their first scuba-diving lesson in the swimming pool at Outram Secondary School. -- ST PHOTO: MUGILAN RAJASEGERAN

THIS year, Mr Choo Poh Choon is learning to scuba-dive.

But unlike most underwater aficionados, the 27-year-old has spent the past seven years in a wheelchair - the result of an accident during national service which left him paralysed from the waist down.

'When my parents heard I was going to dive, they said: 'Are you sure?'

'But they're not surprised any more after all the things I've done,' said Mr Choo, who has also tried his hand at basketball and tennis.

He is working towards his Padi Open Water dive certificate along with three other disabled Singaporeans. Each has a different disability: Geeta Varatharaja, 22, is partially deaf, 21-year-old Jeffrey Soh is partially blind, while Hay Qing Hui, 16, is a special-needs student.

Meanwhile, the four will be taking part in a marine-themed charity musical called A Nation In Concert, scheduled for October.

'We wanted to give them the experience of being in the ocean, so that they'll be able to express it better when they perform,' said concert organiser Alvin Lim.

The musical, which will be held at Victoria Theatre in October, features more than a hundred disabled performers alongside able-bodied professional artists like Timothy Nga and Pierre Goh. Tickets will go on sale next month.

The concert benefits four charities: Handicaps Welfare Association, the Association for Persons with Special Needs, the Singapore Association for the Deaf and the Singapore Association of the Visually

Handicapped. A Nation In Concert performances were also held in 2005 and 2006.

Scuba classes for the disabled performers are being conducted by dive centre Ocean Ambassador, which is also sponsoring their gear.

International diving association Padi said on its website that people with physical challenges regularly earn the Open Water certificate. The four have medical approval to take the course.

'Disabled divers have no fear - they've already gone through the worst time in their life. Diving is just another challenge for them to overcome their physical limits,' said Ocean Ambassador academic director Eugene Yeo.

For Mr Choo, scuba-diving also pushes the boundaries on social limits.

'In the water, I feel like a normal person. Everyone is equal and I don't need a wheelchair,' he said.

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