

Title : Scuba diving? No problem
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Disabled Singaporeans go underwater for charity



Dive buddies: (From left) Mr Jeffrey Soh, Ms Geeta Varatharaja, Mr Choo Poh Choon and Hay Qing Hui.

He is paralysed from the waist down. But Mr Choo Poh Choon, 27, always had a dream to scubadive.

He went to several dive operators, but they all refused to take him.

So when he heard about a chance for handicapped people to dive, he didn't need to think twice.

Mr Choo is one of four Singaporeans with four different disabilities who are now working towards getting their Padi open water dive certification.

The others are Ms Geeta Varatharaja, 22, who is deaf, Mr Jeffrey Soh, 21, who is partially blind, and Hay Qing Hui, 16, a special needs student with a low IQ.

They had seen their doctors and were cleared to take the course before they started it.

All four also happen to be participants of a charity performance in October called A Nation In Concert (Anic in short, also the name of the organiser).

It was while preparing for the show that they were roped into the diving course.

The show's volunteer organiser, Mr Alvin Lim, 30, said: "When I watched them perform, I realized that they have so much they could achieve. So why should we focus on their limitations?"

"I have dived for 12 years and I want them to have the same experience as anyone else."

So, he approached Ocean Ambassador Dive Centre, which will be absorbing the cost of the instructors, pool classes and gear rental.

The other costs, such as the boat rental and lodging at Pulau Tioman, will be borne by Anic. This means the participants won't have to pay a cent.

An open water course in the market typically costs between \$400 and \$700.

Through this, Mr Lim hopes to encourage more people with disabilities to engage in sports as recreational activities.

For Mr Soh, an undergrad at Singapore Management University, the diving course is a chance for him to gain new experiences despite his new disability - he lost his sight only last year, after complications from the eye disease glaucoma.

He now suffers from tunnel vision, meaning he has no peripheral vision and can only see the 15 per cent of his field of vision in the centre. "Imagine walking around with binoculars, but with no lenses," he said.

Encouragement

When he told his friends about the diving course, their response was: "Good for you."

He said: "My parents are worried, but I think they understand. I can take care of myself.

"This is something I have always wanted to do even before I went blind."

His doctor said that while his eyesight has stabilised and he is unlikely to lose more sight, there is still a possibility that he might.

Mr Soh said: "By then, at least I can remember what the water looks like."

Among the four, Mr Soh and Ms Varatharaja have snorkelling experience.

Mr Choo, an IT consultant, takes part in various wheelchair sports such as tennis and basketball, and was part of the team that came in third in the Asean Wheelchair Basketball Championship in 2003.

Qing Hui, 16, is an athlete - he took part in the Special Olympics in Shanghai last year, where he came in first in the 4x400m relay and fourth in the 400m and 800m. He also inline-skates.

He is most looking forward to seeing starfish and wrecks during the dives.

His father, Mr David Hay, 45, a technical support officer, said with pride: "It doesn't mean that if they have low IQ, they cannot learn. If you give them a chance, they can."

He said he was not worried about his son going diving. "What's most important is that he is interested and there is an opportunity."

The four participants have already gone through the theory stage. They will be having their first pool session today, and if they do well, they will go to Pulau Tioman for open water dives, scheduled for the end of next month.

Ocean Ambassador's owner, Mr Eugene Yeo, 27, said he will be providing four dive masters - one for each participant - and two instructors, including himself, for the course.

That is two to three times the usual number of trainers. Other special arrangements include choosing a resort that is wheelchair-accessible, providing hand fins for Mr Choo, and special briefing methods for Ms Varatharaja.

Mr Yeo said: "There are not many people around doing this. It's a lot of work and it's not easy."

"But I don't see a reason why not. If they want to go diving, if they're willing to learn, I'm willing to teach them."

Other Countries

Diving for the disabled has been established for decades in other countries.

Organisations such as the Handicapped Scuba Association (HSA) in the US, and the Netherlands-based International Association for Handicapped Divers (IAHD) even provide their own dive certification programmes for the disabled and for instructors for the handicapped.

A check with HSA showed only one instructor and five disabled divers from Singapore have gone through their programmes, back in 1996 and 1997.

AHD said six Singapore instructors have been trained to date. Four of them are under the same local dive operator, Dive Atlantis.

One of the most famous disabled divers in the world is Mr Carl Brashear, an amputee who made history in 1970 when he became the first black master diver in the US Navy. His life was made into the movie Men of Honor, starring Cuba Gooding Jr and Robert De Niro.

A Nation In Concert 2008 will be staged at the Victoria Theatre on 11 and 12 Oct.

More than a hundred volunteers from the Association for Persons with Special Needs, Handicap Welfare Association, Singapore Association for the Deaf, Singapore Association of the Visually Handicapped and Spaces Community, as well as volunteer guest artistes will star in the show, which has a marine musical theme.

Net proceeds will go to the participating charities. Tickets will be available soon through Sistic. Prices range from \$30 to \$45.

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