

MVP Youth Program expands from Scuba Diving to Swimming & Sailing

Written by Carol M. Bareuther, RD



A wave of nervous excitement washed across the faces of the teenagers that stood poolside clad in scuba gear. Andre Webber, owner of St. Thomas Diving Club, gave the signal and the students, both Boy Scouts and Venture Scouts, jumped into the water buddied up in twos. Then the fun began. Webber supervised as the teens put into practical application the classroom instruction they received in this PADI Open Water Diver course. Regulator recovery. Clearing a flooded mask. Leg cramp removal. They did it all and as they did relaxed smiles of accomplishment flooded each face.



The seas surrounding the Virgin Islands are one of the territory's greatest recreational assets. Millions of visitors come here each year to swim, dive, sail and sport fish. Now, through the Marine Vocational Program or MVP, Jimmy Loveland's goal is to introduce young islanders to a variety of water sports so that they can turn this seaworthy asset into a career provider in the future.

The MVP program celebrates its fourth year in 2011. The program kicked-off in December 2007 with scuba diving instruction.

"We had a meeting with the parents and kids and had them sign a learning agreement that focused on attendance, arriving on time and completing the homework. In other words, reinforcing responsibility," says Webber. "We told them if they could do these things, we would assure they would succeed."



Succeed they did. Thirty-five 13- to 24-year-old Boy Scouts and Venture Scouts to date have completed the six-week PADI Open Water Diver certification course. Two-thirds of these scouts have gone on to take the PADI Advanced Open Water Diver course, one-third have become Rescue Divers and six are now working on their Divemaster certification.

One of the students working towards becoming a Divemaster is Jerome Hodge. The 24-year-old University of the Virgin Islands student who is a Venturing advisor says, "I always wanted to learn to scuba dive, to be able to look under the beautiful water and see the fish without holding my breath."

Hodge adds, "Being a certified diver gives me an edge and that's important in this

economy and today's job market."

This statement is very true. For example, right here on St. Thomas businesses such as Coral World Ocean Park employ Rescue Divers to accompany visitors on their Sea Trek tour as do the owner/operators of the B.O.S.S. Underwater Adventure, an excursion where visitors ride underwater scooters.



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The credential is great, says St. Thomas Diving Club's Webber, "but it's more than just carrying a PADI card. The students now have the skills they need to be successful and they have confidence."

Confidence is something Dr. Ardrina Scott-Elliot saw grow in her 13-year-old son, Drake, upon completion of his Open Water certification.

"Scouting teaches important life skills, enhances academic learning and is fun and the dive program provided all three too. It was also a good ego boost for my son," says Scott-Elliot, a Cub Scout leader, adjunct professor and administrator for Institutional Advancement at the University of the Virgin Islands. "He can go anywhere now, say he's a certified PADI diver, show his card and be able to rent scuba equipment."

Scuba diving is only one spoke in the

wheel of the multi-faceted MVP program. candidates for the diving and the new sailing program," says Loveland, director of the USVI Open/Atlantic Blue Marlin or 'Boy Scout' tournament.

Paul Stoeken, a lifelong Virgin Islander, Olympic windsurfer and instructor at the VI Sailing School, will teach the Scouts to sail.

"We are starting them off with our U.S. Sailing Level 1 Small Boat Certification Course which will be done on a variety of boats such as the Hobie Wave, Hunter Xcite, and the IC-24," says Stoeken. "The course takes approximately 20 hours to complete and covers wind theory, rigging, de-rigging, launching, self-rescue, capsizing recovery, basic seamanship, knot tying, points of sail, steering, sail trim, tacking, jibing, and pretty much everything they need to be able to control a small sailboat on their own safely. The plan is to have the

certification coincide with one of the many local regattas and get them racing."

Stoeken adds, "From there, kids that show an interest and the skills required can enroll in our U.S. Sailing Level 1 Small Boat Instructor Course which will open up opportunities to work as sailing instructors at the many watersports centers in the Virgin Islands. From there, we will have them log hours on the water to work toward getting their USCG Captains License which would open up even more opportunities for employment in the marine industry."

Funding for the MVP program has come from the profits of offshore sportfishing tournaments and from private donations. Future plans call for hiring a Director who will write grants and develop curriculum and the establishment of an endowment fund that will sustain the program long term.

Donation checks can be made out to VI Council, Boy Scouts of America. Please mail to: MVP, 6616 Estate Nadir, St. Thomas, VI 00802

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