

At-risk kids dive off the deep end

January 18, 2007

By Erin Calandriello STAFF WRITER

ELGIN -- From scuba diving in the Bahamas to earning degrees in underwater photography -- at-risk students throughout Elgin School District U46 are reinventing themselves through a local scuba diving program.

"I'm a whole new person," said Zac Stanley, a 14-year-old at Kimball Middle School in Elgin, who participated in the 12-week Scuba Training At Risk Students (STARS) program last year. "I learned how to scuba dive, but I also learned some life lessons -- just to stay calm and respect others. I definitely improved in public speaking and I have much more self-esteem."

Stanley, who has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, is one of 11 at-risk students who participated in the scuba diving sessions last year through STARS, a nonprofit organization, which helps at-risk youths ages 13 to 17 do better in school and succeed in future careers through a healthy activity -- scuba diving.

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Elgin police Officer Jimmy Mendez adjusts the straps on Luis Negron's scuba gear while Jerricho Mendez checks his tank. Luis, 15, took part in Scuba Training for At-Risk Students, or STARS, on Sunday morning at The Centre of Elgin.

How to help

- To donate to the STARS scuba diving program, visit the Web site at www.starsinternational.org

"I had good grades but they got a lot better," said Kyle Gerber, another 14-year-old pupil at Kimball, who participated in the program. "Before I was in the program, I could be really bossy and take control of anything. Through the program, I learned to be a team player."

Over the course of 12 weeks, students learned the chemistry and physics behind scuba diving and endured the physical strains of the sport. In the end, students traveled to Turks and Caicos Islands, 30 miles south of the Bahamas, and participated in 11 dives. They earned open-water certificates -- meaning they can officially dive in the ocean, learned the history of the slave trade in the British islands, and comprehended 110 sign language signals for communicating underwater.

But the point of the program is to instill both academic and personal values in students, said one local school liaison officer, who spearheaded the program.

"These kids come in seeking an identity and they're not sure where they fit in. And we definitely give them that -- a unique identity," said Jimmy Mendez of the Elgin Police Department, the school liaison officer at Kimball.

"We use scuba diving as a tool to motivate kids and show them and teach them that life is not beyond repair," continued Mendez, who also was an at-risk youth in Elgin before he became a police officer. "We provide an alternative to drugs, gangs, teen pregnancy and crime."

STARS plans on sponsoring the program once again this spring. It already has started the process by nominating 32 middle and high school students throughout the district who are battling issues ranging from learning disorders to single-parent homes to financial instability.

Last Sunday morning, the youth had an introductory session to the program to test their abilities in the water with scuba gear at The Centre of Elgin. The next step the nominees face is writing a one-page essay describing their intentions in the program, which is due this Saturday. Local social workers and counselors will go over the essays. And in the next two weeks, 20 youth will be chosen to take on the scuba diving challenge and trip.

However, this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity will not happen without funding, said Kevin Vaughn, director of STARS.

"The money issue is a big distraction," said Vaughn, who spent about \$12,500 out of pocket last year to sponsor the program and trip. "I hired a professional fundraiser and an investment banker so that we can pull the money together to pull it off."

Vaughn added that his ultimate goal is to have "three trips during the summer and get three companies to sponsor each of them."

With or without money, it's not just the trip that makes the scuba experience worth it, it's that look of achievement on the youths' faces, Mendez said.

"When these kids, who have worked so hard, step off a boat and step into the ocean," Mendez said, "and you see that little glimmer in their eye through their goggles when it all comes together, nothing compares to it."