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Diving to a better future

By **Liza Roche**
STAFF WRITER

A new program for at-risk teens is asking them to dive deep — not just into water, but into themselves.

And next month, their ultimate diving test will take them out of the Fox Valley, to the tropical Turks and Caicos Islands.

The program, called Scuba E.T.C. (Empowerment Through Challenge), was started by a group of scuba divers in the western suburbs who wanted to show at-risk teens how they could set the foundation for a better life through the learning more about the sport.

While learning scuba, they believe, a lot can be learned about coping with challenges, taking responsibility for choices, and dealing with stress.

"It's a sport that requires attention for detail and accountability for choices," said Kevin Vaughn, one of the trip's organizers. "And it's a buddy sport, a team sport."

Vaughn, of Lake in the Hills, and his co-organizers recruited students by working with the Elgin Recreation Center, as well as police officer liaisons who work in area high schools to tell students about the opportunity to learn about scuba diving and to eventually take the expenses-paid trip. The group targeted students who have gotten into trouble with gangs or drugs, or those who have had early sexual encounters.

Initially, 22 students, ages 13 to 17, tried out for the opportunity, but the group was whittled down to 18 students after gauging students' interest in the sport, a student essay and a meeting with parents.

The final group has been brought down to 11 students — in part out of a requirement that students attend all scuba-related activities, don't skip school, and maintain their grades.

Scuba E.T.C. did a similar trip last year, but with students through the Northern Illinois Special Recreation Association.

For about the past two months, the students have met one night a week for diving education. They also had two all-day, in-pool sessions to learn diving skills. In addition, learning from last year's experience that students needed to work better together, this year's group has been required to participate in weekly physical fitness, as well as team-building activities led by area psychologist Susan Halsey.

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Organizers say the trip to the Turks and Caicos is designed to be more than just a diving adventure, but a life experience. The students who make it through the program get to experience what life is like for kids in other parts of the world who do not have the same opportunities as those in the United States.

During the trip, the students will have an opportunity to interact with a group of teenagers from the islands who are undergoing a similar diving and life skills program. The Scuba E.T.C. group also will tour and perform community service in the form of beach cleanups.

During last year's trip, noted co-organizer Chris Cote of Cary, students found about \$10,000 worth of marijuana on the beach during the cleanup and brought it to authorities.

The prospect of the trip — and the work that has gone into it — has been a turning point for 17-year-old Jesse Chavez of Algonquin.

A junior at Jacobs High School, Chavez learned about the opportunity at the Elgin Recreation Center while doing community service.

Chavez said he struggled in early high school and got into a lot of trouble — he already has been convicted in three felonies.

But the opportunity helped Chavez focus on working on something. He's ditched his usual routine of "hanging" with friends and now uses that time to do the scuba activities or work on school.

"In the beginning it was really hard," he said. "I used to have all my friends over all the time."

Along the way, as part of a requirement by the organizers, Chavez even found a way to quit smoking — something that he says has been difficult as even his parents smoke in the home.

Scuba diving has never been on his list of things to do, but Chavez said he was instantly interested in the idea. "I like extreme sports," he said.

Chavez is looking forward to the trip, but he said he now is also looking at his entire future through a brighter lens, and even is considering college.

"My parents have seen it in me," he said. "I've matured a lot."

Although organizers mainly are paying for the \$50,000 trip through their for-profit diving training company, Scuba E.T.C. still is looking for corporate sponsors and other financial support. For more information about funding the upcoming trip, contact Kevin Vaughn (847) 248-1410 or Chris Cote (847) 224-6898.

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