

## In the News

Elgin At-Risk Youth Dive Deep For Positive Influences (04/14/06)

**S**cuba E.T.C. (*Empowerment Through Challenge*) designed for coaching at-risk teenage youth, kicked their fins into high gear on March 4th at a Discover Scuba Experience hosted at the Elgin YWCA. The event attracted over 25 "nominated" candidates, (ages 13-17) from throughout Kane county. The eager and enthusiastic youth were vying for limited positions in a group coordinated by the Elgin Recreation Center and Elgin Police Dept. that will take flight to the **Turks & Caicos Islands** in June. While on this Caribbean excursion participants will complete their open water scuba evaluations and be the centerpiece of many more exciting international activities. Unlike traditional retail dive programs the Scuba ETC youth must maintain strict adherence to behavior, academic grades and school attendance throughout the entire program to sustain their participation, which is only a glimpse at our expectations for these youth.

**T**he comprehensive 6-month program encompasses the areas of; Literacy/Communications, Science-In-Action, Self-Development, Community Service, Geographical/Environmental Awareness, Cultural Sensitivity, Fitness/Stamina training, Career/Educational counseling and advanced scuba certification. During the tenth week two distinct groups of at-risk youth (numbering an estimated 20-23) will be merged in the paradise of the Turks & Caicos Islands (TCI). 10 participating TCI at-risk youth will be linked with our Elgin participants long before they arrive in the country via Internet to encourage bonding and ice-breaking with their new friends.

**D**uring this action-packed week culturally diverse youth will be joined for all 6 days for 24 hours involved in activities including cultural knowledge exchanging, lectures, meals and community service. During our 2005 pilot program, three afternoons of beach clean-up activities (paying tribute to our host agencies/government) actually yielded the largest buried drug find in TCI history, unearthed by our participants thus making the **national news in both countries**. This was tremendous exposure for kids who needed positive recognition in at that point in their lives.

**T**he program addresses the demographic of youth who face critical and sometimes irreversible choices about their personal ethics, future education and career direction. At times, choices frequently demand specific coaching and incentives to influence positive decisions. Conversely, the decision making process for budding diverse at-risk youth who face social, economic, cultural or learning disabilities is **exponentially more difficult**. To this segment of youth, seemingly insurmountable obstacles confronting them daily can potentially steer them into unfavorable life strategies such as school absenteeism/dropout, gang affiliation, alcohol and substance abuse. In the most extreme cases, these youth may even venture into violence or criminal activity seeking acceptance and recognition.

**A** goal of the program is to inhibit consideration of the negative alternatives that these youth face positioning them with positive role models, providing recognition, opportunities and engaging interests. Deliberate activities targeted at this segment of youth during these pivotal years can strengthen their impressionable characters and redirect them towards new positive opportunities/strategies. Although our current focus is in the greater Chicago area, Scuba E.T.C. is a program which we can suitcase to any statewide location, or even deliver beyond the Illinois state and US boundaries.

**T**he directors Kevin Vaughn and Chris Cote working in parallel with Elgin Recreation Center and the Elgin Police Department are jointly fundraising the required funds to take 18 individuals (including staff) through program. Some of the funds will even be used to provide for materials required by the financially challenged youth in TCI before the Elgin group arrives demonstrating international goodwill. The Elgin Township has graciously stepped forward to provide funding in support of the program while other requests for funding from other local agencies like the Grand Victoria Foundation are still pending.

**T**his comprehensive and customized 10 week curriculum is a modified PADI scuba course with two significant additional facets that have been designed to prepare the young team to mentally work together and physically enable them to endure several demanding dives required during the trip. Participants who complete the entire program will receive 3 distinct PADI certifications including a specialty in sign language skills that they will master prior to the trip. Also, each Scuba E.T.C. graduate will receive a complete set of personalized high-grade snorkeling gear to continue their interest in diving beyond the program. Our long term goal is to roll these participants back into any future groups as mentors and coaches for incoming at-risk youth.

**O**nce the group returns from the islands Scuba E.T.C. will continue interaction with the youth by hosting three alumni events at area lakes to keep the newly certified divers enjoying their new skills while introducing them to local dive mentors and professionals.

**A**ny business leader interested in becoming part of this unique Elgin program either as a sponsor or mentor should contact Kevin Vaughn (847) 248-1410 or Chris Cote (847) 224-6898. We deeply desire to have Elgin business leaders shape future Elgin ambassadors to the world!