

# Troubled teens



# DIVE

# into a better life



Story by Kevin L. Vaughn

**T**roubled teens in Chicago's western suburbs are discovering the potential within themselves through scuba diving with Scuba Empowerment Through Challenge.

Scuba E.T.C., now in its third year, helps underachieving and at-risk teens build skills to cope with challenges and stresses of everyday life. A collaboration between the volunteer program and the Elgin, Ill., Police Department ended in a six-day open-water diving certification trip to the Turks and Caicos Islands.

Detectives Jimmy Mendez and Frank Amato selected youth participants ages 13 to 17 who warranted an Outward Bound-style of experience to divert their lives to a positive pathway. The detectives accomplished the goal without the typical \$3,000 to \$5,000 cost for such adventure programs.

Chicago-born Scuba E.T.C. encompasses three elements—physical fitness education / development, self-development / team-building and advanced scuba studies—which build teens' knowledge and skills. Teens and their parents

must agree to a behavior contract including mandatory requirements on school attendance, rigorous training and academic grade point average improvements to stay in the six-month program.

Curriculum and pace of Scuba E.T.C. pushes the kids beyond their comfort zone to new physical, mental, emotional and skill levels. Scuba is simply the vehicle to teach a wide array of life skills including: accountability; enhanced self-esteem; personal, environmental and cultural values; advanced communications using American Sign Language underwater; physical fitness; science skills and conflict-problem resolution. Participants learn life skills that can be applied to the real world, with emphasis on both career and educational opportunities that scuba can

provide. Mentoring is the overall foundation.

Graduation from Scuba E.T.C. is even harder than being accepted into the program. Of the 22 students accepted into the 2006 program, 11 earned all certifications achievable through completion of the entire program. The rest withdrew or were disqualified for failing to sustain the requirements.

To be accepted into the program, candidates must undergo a four-part selection process. First they must be deemed at-risk by a community leader or organization. Nominees must write a one-page essay outlining why they want to be in the program and what they expect to achieve. The candidates also must attend Discover Scuba to see if they have the confidence to continue in a scuba certification program. Finally, youth and their parents or sponsors are interviewed to review the requirements and expectations of the program.

For many students, getting selected is easy. The hard part is living up to the standards. The teens must commit to making responsible life decisions and to working in a team-oriented environment weekly. They must maintain or raise their academic grades. Students meet twice a week, one night for diving education and the second for both physical fitness led by a personal trainer and team-building activities led by two clinical psychologists. In addition, they must attend all-day pool sessions on Saturdays to develop scuba skills.

"Achieving something like a scuba certification can be a tremendous source of pride and accomplishment for anyone, including myself," Detective Mendez said. "When you couple that with the skills learned by working in a closely knit team, trusting others and being dependable, that's when the real benefits of a program like this come to light. There are hundreds of kids in my school district and community that could potentially benefit by the

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