

Safety Stop: Kevin L. Vaughn

PADI Master Instructor, HSA Instructor and S.T.A.R.S. Founder

Kevin L. Vaughn, PADI Master Instructor, HSA Instructor and youth advocate from Chicago had a vision of the broad scope of collateral benefits that could result from scuba training at-risk teenage youth. As an active PADI instructor, Vaughn witnessed first-hand the obvious impacts to scuba participants in the areas of self confidence and esteem building while volunteering with the Diveheart Foundation of Chicago directed by Jim Elliot. What was clear was that all the true benefits were not being tapped and delivered.

In 2005, Vaughn collaborated to deliver a trial scuba course that basically doubled the number of hours of training provided by retail scuba centers. Following a winter of redesign the program returned in 2006 filling previous voids and setting new benchmarks. The staff and curriculum tripled, encompassing two new facets of physical fitness and self/team development. "At-Risk" became clearly defined as "youth with one or more of the following challenges: academics, inappropriate behavior, cultural and/or language obstacles, economic constraints and inappropriate personal socialization within an academic setting or amongst peers". Candidates for the program were selected through an alliance with the Elgin Illinois Police Dept. positioned as liaison officers within the local schools. Stringent requirements for participation included 100% school attendance, stable/increasing grades and rigid behavior expectations outlined in a contract.

The 2006 Turks and Caicos trip was a tremendous success with assistance from the Turks & Caicos Tourism and TCI Dept. of Coastal Resources. Provo Turtle Divers owners (Dave and Melinda Volkert) stepped up their contribution of resources and financial support to ensure our participants met with nothing but success in the turquoise blue waters of Providenciales. Upon returning from TCI 50% of participants completed certifications through PADI Rescue Diver, and one youth even began his PADI Divemaster program. The next school year indicated that participants who held to extraordinary standards

had achieved up to 8 PADI certifications and increased their school GPA by as much as 168%. One of the many rewards for completing the program included a personalized set of snorkeling gear, additional PADI courses and the opportunity to be selected as a mentor to coach new participants in the following year.



Following a breathtaking year of positive changes in the lives he touched, Vaughn spun off to form a new non-profit 501c3 with former students and staff members aptly named Scuba Training At Risk Students, Inc. (dba www.STARSInternational.org). Vaughn has two programs in progress this year, Elgin, IL and Providenciales TCI STARS headed up by his partners at Provo Turtle Divers. The threefold philosophy for helping these kids break out of self-limiting behavior is Compassion, Understanding and Patience. Proof of change is in the many positive comments from parents and teachers. This year the S.T.A.R.S. program candidates included 42 nominated youth spanning two countries.

Our season kicked off with dinner guests John Chatterton and Richie Kohler who

inspired the kids to carry the torch to the next great discovery. Our 2007 curriculum has evolved into a safety-oriented 12-week multi-faceted program, which simply provides an appealing vehicle to reel kids back into their academic studies such as literacy and science. The staff is comprised of a diverse group of dedicated volunteers that achieve personal satisfaction through providing at-risk students with an avenue for a greater chance of success and advanced opportunities. S.T.A.R.S. is supported by dedicated PADI representatives, dive clubs, and local retailers, but is funded entirely by donations.

A dedicated corporate sponsorship is the current goal with Vaughn and other program directors seeking to expand extensively, even to the point of expanding to multiple domestic and international locations. Vaughn and the STARS staff are dedicated to being a catalyst for youth, academic, community and cultural change.