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PART TWO

Commitment makes the difference

DOLPHIN DISCOVERY

by Jeffrey O'Hare

The smell of briny sea water fills the air and the salty taste of an unexpected wave wets your mouth. As the current surges forward with great force, it reveals something big moving just beneath the surface. Just as it seems about to hit you, the thing swims to one side and brushes past with powerful grace. You feel its slick, wet skin—the texture of a newly-peeled hard-boiled egg—as it slides under your outstretched hand. High-pitched clicks and whistles accompany the lapping sounds of the water. When you are blind, senses other than sight must describe the world. And the world you are in is the that of dolphins.

A vacation for Sarah

My daughter, Sarah, is now eight-years old. She has a number of physical and mental disabilities, including blindness due to cortical visual impairment. She has also been diagnosed with slight cerebral palsy and may have colpocephaly (pressure on the brain), though her doctors are not positive. For a time, she experienced seizures that tightened her entire body. These are now somewhat controlled by medication. Her speech patterns remain in the four-to-six-month age range, she cannot stand unassisted, and it is only in the last

year that she has learned to crawl. She is very tactile, defensive, and takes a long time

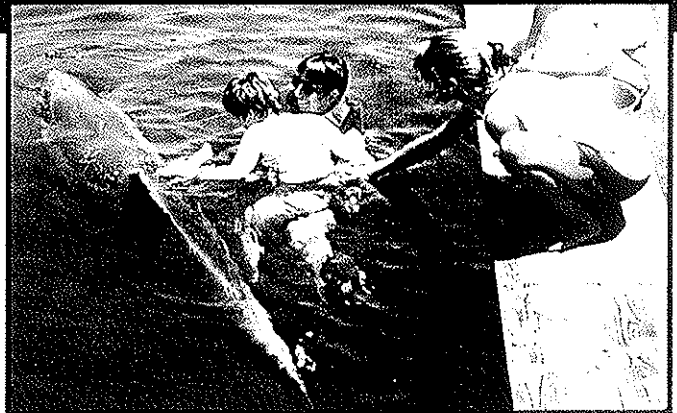
to warm up to new surroundings or people.

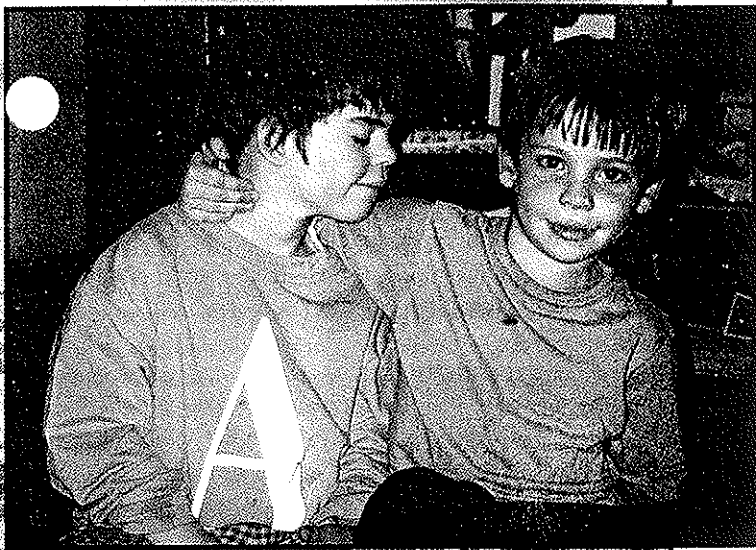
This past summer, it was important to find a vacation in which Sarah could actually participate in and get out of her wheelchair. I had seen a documentary about dolphins being used in therapy programs, and so I investigated some of these facilities.

There are plenty of places to swim with dolphins. Tourists flock to Florida to jump in the water and splash around with the big "fish." However, less than a handful of places are designed specifically to deal with people with disabilities. Through research, I found Island Dolphin Care (IDC) in Key Largo, Florida. IDC is one of the few places in the world offering structured therapeutic swims for children with disabilities.

Sarah loves being in water, though she cannot swim without assistance. IDC sounded good, yet having been to a number of facilities that looked great in the brochure and then didn't provide what the child really needs, we wanted to visit first.

The two therapists, Deena Hoagland, M.S.W., L.C.S.W., and William Shannon, Ph.D., took Sarah's mother, Ginny, on a tour, introduced





Bottom left (opposite page): Sarah prepares for a swim. The people on the dock are listening to the Dolphin speak. They are: Squirt, Sarah, Deena Hoagland (therapist) Nicki Lapierre (dolphin trainer), and Ginny O'Hare.

Bottom right (opposite page): Sarah's first swim. She has just been placed in the water and is touching Squirt the dolphin for the first time. With them are: Deena Hoagland, Nicki Lapierre, and Ginny O'Hare.

Left: Sarah and her brother Edward.



person's weight. Being in the water freed Sarah from her wheelchair and allowed her more freedom of movement. It is also advantageous when working with those who are tactilely defensive because the water provides a constant surrounding pressure to sensitive nerve endings. (For information on Aquatic Therapy, see *EXCEPTIONAL PARENT*, July 1997; pp.60-61).

As her first experience at IDC, Sarah was introduced to Squirt, a female Atlantic bottle-nosed dolphin who has been working with handicapped children for eight years. Imagine how scary it must be to feel a three-hundred-pound animal coming toward you and not be able to see it or to know exactly what it will do. There was no question as what Squirt would do, since she had been trained to remain calm and to come up slowly alongside Sarah.

Swims are conducted with at least one recreation therapist in the water with each child. The therapist gets a sense of which of the dolphin's behaviors the child will be the most comfortable with, and coordinates with a trainer, who is on the dock. The child joins in as the dolphin works through specific behaviors (such as swimming close to the child, rolling over, jumping, speaking, etc.), which the trainer asks the dolphin to do.

At Island Dolphin Care, the dolphins are used primarily to tap into a child's most positive aspects. Maybe it's a communion with this big creature on some unexplainable level, or maybe it's the wonder of the water. I can't explain why dolphins bring unexpected things out in the children they work with, I just know they do. Dolphins do not have miraculous powers, nor is there any scientific proof that they can heal sickness or handicaps. However, dolphins are very intelligent mammals that seem to have an innate, or natural, affinity for people, especially those with disabilities.

Classroom follow-up

The corresponding classwork at IDC aims to build upon the dolphin experience, which is intended to help the child become more open and receptive to outside stimuli. The time spent doing classwork is just as important as the swims. Fonzie's Classroom (named after the first dolphin Deena Hoagland worked with) carries over the ocean and marine life theme. The room is painted with underwater scenes in blues and purples. A lush soundtrack of ocean and dolphin sounds plays softly in the background.

Much of the classwork done with Sarah was exploratory as Deena and Bill Shannon tried to draw out which things would gain a positive response. With Ginny and me to help, they worked with Sarah to paint pictures and tried to get her to focus her vocalizations

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her to the dolphins, and spent a great deal of time going over what dolphin therapy was about. One important thing was that IDC would not take a child for just a half-hour swim. IDC was committed to developing individualized week-long programs of dedicated therapy for each child. Beyond "selling" their place, Deena and Bill were genuinely interested in giving Sarah a meaningful experience. Finally, we decided to try it. And going to IDC was one of the best decisions we ever made on Sarah's behalf.

er works

working in water accommodates people with physical limitations because water provides the buoyancy to help support a

In the Swim of Things: Jeffrey O'Hare speaks with Deena Hoagland

Deena Hoagland's career working with special needs kids began at Creedmore State Hospital, New York, as a volunteer at age 13. She later earned a bachelor of arts degree in elementary education and one in psychology. She has a master's degree in clinical social work. Deena has run her own private practice since 1983 and specializes in children's and family issues.

Today Deena Hoagland heads Island Dolphin Care, a dolphin-assisted recreation therapy program in Key Largo, Florida, along with her partner, William Shannon, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist specializing in school psychology. IDC is a not-for-profit organization that relies heavily on outside philanthropy. Donations and grants account for keeping the operating costs manageable, as well as providing scholarships for children who might otherwise be unable to participate in this dolphin-assisted recreation therapy program.

J.O'H: What started you on the path of developing this program?

DH: My son, Joe, was born with a rare heart anomaly, truncus arteriosus. He needed a lot of surgery very early, from about the age of eight weeks. We were living in Denver, but had taken Joe to doctors in California. The surgeries went fine, but when Joe returned to Denver, the high altitude caused his stitches to pop out.

We had to take him back for more surgery. During his third surgery, at age three, Joe suffered a massive stroke which left him partially paralyzed.

J.O'H: How did you get to Florida?

DH: We came here because it was warm and I thought it would offer the opportunity for Joe to get some aquatic therapy.

EP: When did the dolphins come into this?

DH: When I approached Lloyd Burgoss at Dolphins Plus, I was mainly looking for a place where Joe could swim. But after I explained Joe's needs, Lloyd talked about some dolphin recreation therapy programs outside his place. He wanted to meet Joe to find out if Joe might be a candidate for this kind of therapy.

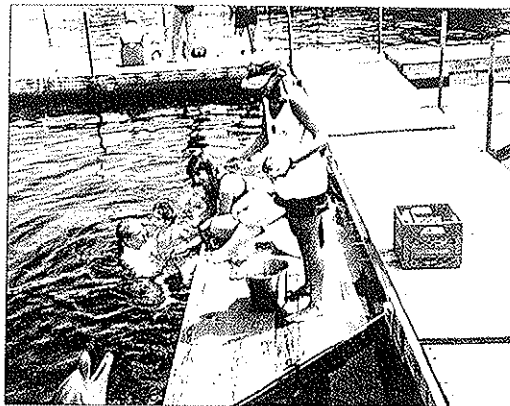
J.O'H: How did Joe respond to the dolphins?

DH: At first, he was in awe of them. Here were these amazing animals swimming and jumping and splashing. It was daunting, but fascinating. Joe adapted and got comfortable very quickly though, and became friends with a dolphin named Fonzie.

So we began incorporating his therapy programs, both physical and occupational, into Joe's dolphin playtime.

J.O'H: Was it successful?

DH: Joe responded well from the beginning, but the therapy took a long time. He's 11 now, has full mobility, and is enrolled in school. His therapy is still going on.



Feeding dolphins like Fonzie and Squirt are just one of the perks of the Island Dolphin Care program.

J.O'H: How did all of this develop into Island Dolphin Care (IDC)?

DH: I saw what working with the dolphins did for Joe, and thought other children might benefit from such a place. With Bill Shannon's assistance, we developed a regimen of activities to involve the child with the dolphins. Besides being in the water, there's a lot of classroom work that goes on.

J.O'H: How do you set the regimen of activities?

DH: We change it constantly. Every child is different, and so each has different needs. Bill and I are constantly trying to

come up with new ways to reach each child who comes here.

J.O'H: What does IDC provide for a child and his or her family?

DH: All I promise is that a family will have a great time. Coming to IDC will be the first time some families ever get to see their special-needs child just have fun. Most families with such children just need to know that they can have a vacation. They can all go somewhere together, see and accomplish new things, and just laugh.

J.O'H: Why is it that the IDC program lasts for five days and not less?

DH: One shot visits just aren't valuable to a child. Children need time to adjust to the new environment and conditions, time to get used to the water as well as the dolphins. The first day alone, a child is so filled with the wonder of it all, that there's little therapy that can take place. But over the course of the week, remarkable changes can happen in both the child and the family.

J.O'H: What are your future plans?

DH: I hope IDC will eventually evolve into a full-time school and respite resort. But for now, I'm just looking forward to next season when I'll be back in the water. (The Island Dolphin Care season lasts from April through October.)

Island Dolphin Care can be contacted at (305) 451-5884, PO Box 2728, Key Largo, FL, 33037. If anyone would like to contact Jeff O'Hare, write to: 151EE Long Pond Rd, Forest City, PA, 18421 or e-mail Jeffhfc@aol.com.

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into intelligible sound. They even tried to teach her simple sign language, such as "more," which was appropriate for both food and swimming.

It wasn't all roses, though. Sarah hated the classroom therapy and would shut down immediately. Other parents may identify with how willful and determined even the most seemingly helpless child can be at times. Every day when we put Sarah's swimsuit on her, she became animated and excited. Once she was taken out of the water and wheeled into the classroom, she went limp, and disassociated herself from her surroundings.

But Deena and Bill continued to work with Sarah as much as she would allow. And over the week, it began to pay off. Sarah became more open and less defensive. She smiled more and interacted better with her surroundings. Even those who had only known Sarah a short time commented on the difference.

With help, Sarah "shook" Squirt's fin, rubbed up against the dolphin's skin, and listened as Squirt clicked a greeting. After a little time, Sarah held on to Squirt's dorsal (top) fin as the dolphin took off at high speed.

Family fun

An added bonus to the trip was that the swimming provided something for the entire family to share and take part in. Sarah's brother, six-year-old Edward, had the opportunity to



Sarah O'Hare (above) was excited to meet Squirt, the dolphin.

swim with other dolphins, as well. Edward was also included while Sarah did her classwork. It was a novel experience for him to see his sister doing the same things he was doing. And she was doing some of them even better.

Florida offered a number of other good experiences for Sarah. We took her on a jet-ski out on the Atlantic ocean. She loved it. Not being able to see, she was unafraid of the water and was wide open to experience what was happening. Comfortably strapped against her mother, Sarah reveled in the noise, the vibration of the engine, the spray and the wind.

More than being a simple trip the entire family could enjoy, this was an adventure that truly provided something worthwhile. Just seeing Sarah smile and peek around in her special way let us know we hadn't taken her on vacation. We'd taken her to a whole new world. **EP**

Jeffrey O'Hare has a master's degree in professional writing and is Creative Director of New Product Development for the magazine, Highlights for Children. He is also the author of many specialty books. He has written for children's television programs as well as closed captions on television for people with hearing impairments.

Jeffrey is also an experienced traveler who hopes to take his children, Sarah and Edward, to some of the great sites throughout the world.

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Photo courtesy of Eagle's Cry Productions

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