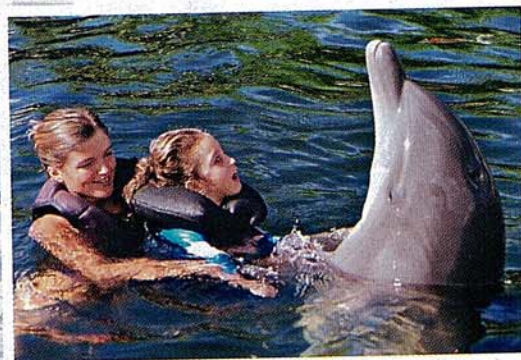




PHOTOGRAPHS: CHARLES WALTON IV



LEFT: Deena Hoagland, pictured with a visitor to Island Dolphin Care, discovered the healing power of dolphins when she and her son first swam with them. ABOVE: "When you're the parent of a disabled child, the playground is not always safe," says Deena. "We become the playground."

## Water Wonder

*Kids, medical professionals, and dolphins come together in Key Largo to create some long-lasting magic.*

It's hard to know at first just what Deena Hoagland means when she refers to Island Dolphin Care (IDC) as a "joy factory." But spend a day at the facility, and you understand. Inside the walls of this modest building, a symbiotic magic happens every day between kids with illness, special education teachers, physical therapists, and dolphins. Within these crystal-blue waters just off tourist-packed U.S. 1, a whole host of emotions—joy, hope, optimism—comes as naturally as the sunshine.

### Joe and Fonzie

Those weren't the emotions in play on a desperate day 17 years ago when Deena started on the path to creating this nonprofit enterprise. Her 3-year-old son, Joe, had suffered a paralyzing stroke after numerous treatments and

surgeries for a rare heart condition. When her insurance quit paying for therapy, Deena—armed with degrees in education and psychology and a natural way with kids—approached Dolphins Plus, a marine mammal research and education center, about letting Joe interact with the animals.

Joe met Fonzie, a 700-pound dolphin that in an instant was "nuzzling Joe and being so gentle," Deena recalls.

"Joe was giggling, and I started giggling. That was something we hadn't had in our life. I decided I needed to share it."

Working with Dolphins Plus, she and husband Peter started raising funds and, through word of mouth, bringing in children with medical and psychological challenges to learn about and swim with trained dolphins. Today, IDC boasts educational programs, a staff of committed professionals and interns, and an international presence. What draws all the group's parts together, though, are those magic moments in the water.

### Healing Waters

On a bright, warm afternoon, a group of children sits in pairs along docks on

### An Integrated Approach

Island Dolphin Care may be the only facility in the world that treats children with dolphin interaction and incorporates medical staff in the process. That setup helps both the kids and the staff. William Blouin, a nurse practitioner at Miami Children's Hospital, is one example. Specializing in hematology, immunology, and oncology, he has been working with IDC for eight years. He says that seeing the kids in the dolphin environment pays dividends in the hospital because the children don't just associate him with needles and painful treatments. "After I bring kids in my care to IDC, it forever changes the way they see me," he says.

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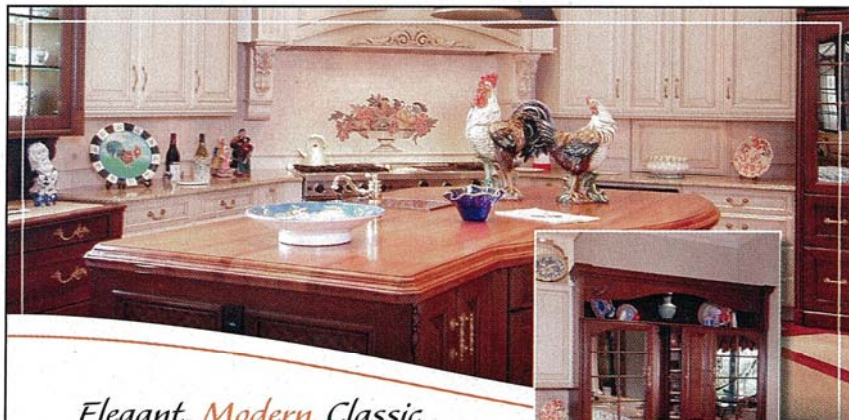


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the canal, listening to Deena and two instructors who are floating in the water before them. Each of the kids deals with some sort of immune disorder, and these few hours are a rare break from hospital stays, shots, and trips to the doctor. Deena and the staff lift the children into the water. The staff gives some hand signals, and the dolphins start their show, jumping over a rubber bar that the kids hold aloft and playing fetch with a plastic ring.

Within minutes, the kids are swimming with the animals, cupping the back side of the dorsal fins with their palms. The dolphins pull the children through the canal in slow, steady circles. Parents and friends stand at small viewing stations along the perimeter, snapping pictures.

One 4-year-old child sits at the edge of the dock, afraid to take a turn. When Deena gently ushers him into the water, he starts crying. Deena cradles him in her arms and whispers in his ear, but the cries get louder. She remains unflappable. She talks to him about the dolphins and then coaxes one of the animals in close. Soon the boy is holding the dolphin's fin, a broad smile across his face.

**Power of Personality**

A big part of the success of Island Dolphin Care lies in the sheer force of Deena's personality. She knows how to make people understand the power of caring for children, and she does it in a way that makes you want to help. Describing the touch tank



Deena helps as a dolphin swim ends with the customary kiss.

she had built for kids who'll never be able to snorkel, she says, "I kept lying awake at night, thinking about this little girl who wanted to snorkel but her doctor wouldn't let her. I wrote for a grant from the Ocean Fund, which is the charity arm of Royal Caribbean and Celebrity Cruise Lines, and they funded this tank."

She strikes deals with hotels to give families a discount on rooms during their visit, and she makes worldwide contacts to get good prices on accessibility equipment, software, and more.

At the root of all the effort, though, is her own experience. Even today, when her son, Joe, is a healthy 20-year-old, living and working in The Keys, she remembers the darker times. She recalls the slow progression of finding hope and feels compelled to share.

"I tried to make this everything I needed," she says. "I wanted to see kids playing and living. I wanted to see that there's a way through this."

With that, she turns again toward the canal, where staffers, children, and families are basking in the sunshine. Deena walks to the docks, ready to get back to the business of creating joy all over again.

WARNER MCGOWIN

## Want To Help Out?

Island Dolphin Care relies on individual and corporate donations to fund its varied programs—from swimming with the dolphins to marine education, five-day programs, group sessions, and more. To learn more or to make a donation, visit [www.islanddolphinscare.org](http://www.islanddolphinscare.org).



Island Dolphin Care purchased four dolphins from Dolphins Plus, the marine mammal research and education facility next door. Dolphins Plus still provides all the primary care for the dolphins used in the program.

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