SWIMMING WITH DOLPHINS

Returning the smiles to children's faces A mom's experience with her paralyzed son led her to start Island Dolphin Care, a therapy paradise for disabled and sick children.

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JOSHUA PREZANT/FOR THE HERALD

Swimming with the dolphins helped Deena Hoagland's toddler son beat paralysis caused by a stroke.
If it could help him, she thought, what about others?
Thus began Hoagland's journey to launch Island Dolphin Care, an oceanside facility with bottlenose dolphins in Key Largo, which, through its physical and emotional therapy, helps disabled and ill children from all over the world.
It was part accident, part desperation that led Hoagland to begin her work with kids and dolphins.
Hoagland's son, Joe, had suffered a stroke when he was 3 during open heart surgery to repair a birth defect. Hoagland just had relocated from Colorado to Key Largo when she brought Joe to Dolphins Plus for a swim.

Joe had not responded well to traditional physical, occupational and speech therapies. With a background as a licensed clinical social worker and teacher, Hoagland had Joe do his therapy exercises in the water. The boy quickly formed a friendship with a dolphin named Fonzie.
''It was an amazing experience for him,'' Hoagland said. "He was laughing and being a little boy again.''
Joe increased his muscle tone and flexibility, as well as his self-esteem. He improved to the point where he could attend school with other children.

SHARING RESULTS

Hoagland says she felt she had to share the remarkable recovery of her son with other children with special needs.
''If dolphins could help Joe feel better about himself, and motivate him to try new tasks, then the dolphins might also help others,'' Hoagland recalls thinking.
She began by bringing children from her son's special needs preschool to swim with the dolphins. From there, she created a not-for-profit called Island Dolphin Care and purchased half of the Dolphin Plus facility.
What began as a small program for local children with special needs didn't stay small for long. Word spread about what Hoagland was accomplishing with the children in her son's class.
''People came and watched and saw the magic,'' she says.
Today, Hoagland works with thousands of children a year and has three full-time therapists on staff. Her husband works at Island Dolphin Care as well. Joe, 18, is graduating from high school this year and has few remaining signs of the stroke. He regularly volunteers at the facility, which now has a recreational, motivational and educational program for ill and special needs children.
For more than a decade Hoagland has been partnering with Miami Children's Hospital, where Joe received his medical care.
On Oct. 30, the hospital foundation recognized Hoagland with the Gift of Joy award.
''The award is given to people who make a difference in lives of children,'' said Ann Lyons, vice president of programs at Miami Children's Hospital Foundation. "Deena has done that.''
"These children are interacting with 700-pound mammals. There is no doctor that could write a prescription to swim with the dolphins, but it brings such joy to kids and families that it does enhance their lives. I would guess least 500 of our kids have been there.''

OTHER HOSPITALS

Seeing the success of patients at Miami Children's led to other local hospitals getting involved. Hoagland now runs one-day summer camps, partnering with local hospitals, for children with cancer, cardiac problems, HIV, diabetes and other illnesses. Doctors and nurses are able to participate as well.
''I have started getting letters from doctors and nurses who told me they rarely get to see kids happy and being children. It empowered them to keep doing what they do at the hospital,'' Hoagland said.
One of Hoagland's donors, Susan Recarey, says she came to Island Dolphin to visit and became interested in contributing.
''I saw that when you can focus a child on something like this, it gives them something to respond to. It's a wonderful way of giving back to the community. You see the results and that makes you want to do more,'' says Recarey, who has a home in Key Largo and Miami-Dade.
Recarey says she was particularly impressed by Hoagland's passion.
''Obviously this is very personal for her but her passion transcends the personal,'' Recarey said.
Hoagland's passion has helped her raise funds to build a 5,000-square-foot center with classrooms, seven aquariums, marine education displays, meeting rooms, a library, and locker rooms/bathrooms. She needs to raise $1.4 million to be debt free. She also is raising funds for scholarships for children.
Hoagland emphasizes this is not a program to cure children, but to help families cope, she says.
''Joe got better because he wanted to get better,'' she notes. "Island Dolphin Care is not a miracle cure. It is magical place where troubles melt for the moment and families learn to laugh and giggle again.''

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