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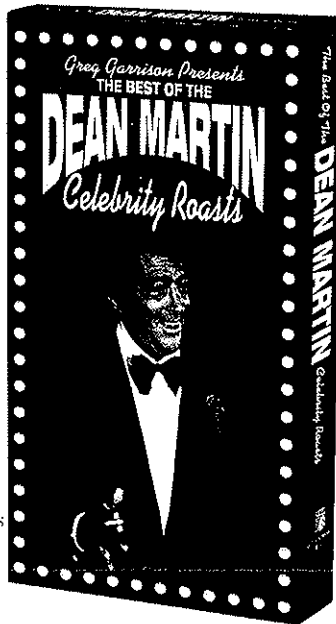
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These Dolphins Help Families Heal

BY LOU ANN WALKER

"Y O. TAXI!" YELLED MARY O'Keeffe, looking L.B., the dolphin, straight in the eye. L.B. had taken the 5-year-old for a dorsal-fin ride around the lagoon. Now she was excitedly calling him back for another ride.

Her mother, Marianne, and Deena Hoagland, her therapist at Island Dolphin Care in Key Largo, Fla., burst out laugh-

ing. A lovely, brown-haired child from Abingdon, Md., Mary has developmental delays and difficulty meeting anyone's gaze. She didn't speak until age 4. And here she was, making a sophisticated joke.

I had come to Key Largo to meet Deena Hoagland, 45, who took the dolphin therapy that had worked for her own son and turned it into a way to help other special-needs kids realize their potential. I was eager to witness the chemistry between these children and the dolphins. What surprised me, though, was the impact the therapy had on entire families: Fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters played together and left changed.

"One father was crying," says Deena Hoagland of Island Dolphin Care. "He had found a way to play with his fragile son and not hurt him."

In 1991, PARADE ran a story titled "The Dolphin Didn't Let Him Down," about Joe Hoagland, then 3, who had a stroke during open-heart surgery that left him partly paralyzed and visually impaired. Despite doctors' suggestions, Deena Hoagland, a social worker, was unwilling to commit her son to a full-time rehabilitation center. She'd heard

about Dolphins Plus, a Key Largo center that did research on dolphin communication, and asked to bring Joe there. "It wasn't until Joe met Fonzie that he smiled," Deena recalled. Fonzie was an Atlantic bottlenose dolphin, and the interest was mutual. Before long, Joe was walking—even carrying heavy buckets of fish for Fonzie. The story drew a huge response, especially from parents asking how to get dolphin therapy for their impaired children. Deena started after-school programs for kids in the area. Eventually, in 1996, Dolphins Plus asked her to set up a full-time, intensive program. Pete, her husband, became the office manager.

"I've walked in these families' shoes," Pete Hoagland said. "It's not just the child that's challenged. It's the whole family." Indeed, the week spent at Island Dolphin Care is the first time some of these families have taken a vacation together.

"What we discovered is that there is no program for typically developing children to be with their special-needs siblings," Deena said. "This is a recreational program. We try to give these families the glue to be together, to have fun as families, and they can keep it bubbling after they go home."

So, when a physically or emotionally disabled or critically ill child at the cen-

PARADISE



Deena Hoagland (l), the founder of Island Dolphin Care, with her client, Mary O'Keefe, and the dolphin L.B.

ter gets into the water, his or her brothers and sisters often are right there at the platform. As Mary O'Keefe worked on her attention span, social skills, gross motor skills and hand-eye coordination, her brother, Jack, was getting a "dolphin rub" by holding out his hand as the dolphins swam back and forth.

For the parents too, the program offers rare freedom. Many have kids who often are confined to hospitals, and that's where the families spend time together. "One day a father was in the parking lot crying," Deena Hoagland recalled. "I asked what was wrong. He told me it was the first time he'd found a way to play with his fragile son without hurting him."

The five-day program is offered from March through November and costs \$2000. (Families find their own lodging.) The nonprofit Island Dolphin Care provides many scholarships to South Florida children

and also offers one-day programs for critically ill children from the surrounding community. Kids come with different diagnoses: attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, cancer, cerebral palsy, autism or low self-esteem. In order to attend Island Dolphin Care, children must be 3 or older, able to swallow and control their heads, and not be aggressive or afraid of water or animals.

Families attend briefing sessions and learn about dolphin behavior. At the end of the week, one family member and the child in therapy put on masks and snorkels for "unstructured" swims with the dolphins. (Dolphins are free *not* to interact with the children, if they so choose.)

"The dolphins react differently with every child," Deena Hoagland explained. "They provide unconditional love and acceptance. It's a gentle experience but a wonderful motivator.

There are no miracles here. I don't believe children will do something they couldn't have done otherwise. But it *can* be magical." **IK**

For more information, write to, IDC, 31 Corrine Place, Dept. P, Key Largo, Fla. 33037. send e-mail to fonzie@islanddolphincare.org or visit www.islanddolphincare.org on the Web.

About the Dolphins:

Like all dolphins, the 11 at the Dolphins Plus center are intelligent. Indeed, dolphin brains are larger than those of humans. The center monitors the dolphins in saltwater lagoons, whose water comes from a tidal exchange from the Atlantic.

Recently, scientists reported evidence of violent behavior among dolphins in the wild. When asked about this, Pete Hoagland of Island Dolphin Care (IDC) responded: "There haven't been any reports of problems with trained dolphins in captivity. But just because they have a smiley face doesn't mean that you don't have to use caution with dolphins in the wild."

The dolphins in the IDC program are free not to "work," but they often exhibit an innate curiosity about humans and a particular interest in disabled children. The dolphins' playfulness leads them to invent games like follow the leader and tag among themselves and sometimes with humans whom they like. Several of the aquatic mammals at Dolphins Plus were specifically trained to work with special-needs kids. Children with physical problems also find the water's buoyancy gives them more freedom than usual.

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