

Alumni Deena and  
Peter Hoagland have found  
healing in an unlikely place.

# the dolphin cure

**E**van stiffened as he was lowered into the murky water for the first time, and his tiny body never relaxed despite being greeted by two exuberant dolphins that squeaked and clicked a welcome.

The 11-year-old has severe cerebral palsy that prevents him from speaking. His coordination is terrible, and he was never expected to walk. Still, his mom, Janice Doyle, hoped he would at least have some fun during his first dolphin-assisted therapy session.

He didn't.

But later that evening, Evan showed signs that the session had sparked something in him. For the first time ever, Evan put one foot in front of the other while using a walker. And two days later, his laughter was interrupting conversations at dinner.

"Last night we told him to be quiet. We were having a conversation, and he was in the middle," Doyle recalls. "He thought it was so funny, us telling him to be quiet! Usually we're trying to get him to say something."

Deena Hoagland believes that laughter is the best medicine for children like Evan and that dolphins are just the right prescription. She delivers the unusual remedy through Island Dolphin Care, a nonprofit educational and recreational therapy program she and her husband, Peter, founded in 1997 to allow children with special needs to interact with dolphins. Thousands of children with cancer, heart disease, autism, depression, developmental delays, cystic fibrosis, cerebral palsy and other ailments have visited the Key Largo, Fla., sanctuary. Most, she says, have experienced pure joy, if not a measure of healing.



Deena Hoagland joins Emer in the water during a therapy session with dolphins (below). Hoagland founded the therapy program to help sick and disabled kids, including Evan (top left).

Sick kids struggle with more than just illness, says Deena, BA psychology '77, MSW '81.

"It's not just a developmental issue the child is dealing with, but how the world interacts with that child," she says. "Island Dolphin Care attempts to create a new world that evens the ball field. There's equal play and equal access. Everybody counts, everybody is loved and everybody is safe. Everybody respects you, loves you and smooches you.

"These kids have freedom in the water, and they see themselves doing this amazing thing that not everybody gets to do," she adds. "They are totally in charge."

Marian McNulty is a believer in the approach.

"Listen to her laugh. That's a belly laugh," McNulty says as she watches her 14-year-old daughter, Emer, in the water.

Cerebral palsy limits Emer's coordination and prevents her from speaking; she spends most of her time in a wheelchair. Still, she's vocal and animated, revealing her thoughts and emotions through "ums" and "ahs," body language and gestures.

As evidence that dolphin therapy works, McNulty ticks off a list of Emer's recent accomplishments. She's learned to change her clothes, feed herself and even cook a little—tasks that specialists had thought were beyond her.

"In the water she has freedom," says McNulty, who has brought Emer to Island Dolphin Care from their home in Ireland four times. "She has such fun here!"

**D**eena and Peter aren't strangers to life supplemented with tragedy.

In 1986, their second child, Joe, was born with a heart defect that required numerous surgeries in his first nine years. During his third operation, Joe suffered a stroke that partially paralyzed his left side and limited his coordination and speech. The Hoaglands were told that he would never lead a normal life.

"It was like we were plucked out of life," Deena recalls. "Every hospital visit brought terror and devastation. I wasn't living. I was existing, but I wasn't living, and unless you live it, you don't get it."

Joe didn't respond to traditional therapies, but his parents never gave up. After moving from Colorado to Florida (Joe benefited from the lower elevation), Deena noticed that a few places offered public swims with dolphins. That sort of activity, she and Peter reasoned, might help them to interact with their son and have fun while giving Joe a chance to experience more physical freedom.

After the first swim, Deena recalls, she noticed a difference in Joe. So, they went back as often as they could.

Today, 19-year-old Joe is walking, talking and even attending community college—all things that experts predicted he'd never do.

After witnessing the effect that dolphin-assisted therapy had on their own son, it wasn't a stretch for the Hoaglands to realize that other children could benefit, too. Their mission



Therapist Jeff Graves helps Evan adjust during his first dolphin-assisted therapy session.

became sharing the alternative therapy as widely as possible through their own program, which has been recognized by the likes of *Primetime Live*, the *Today Show* and the Discovery Channel and has received grants from organizations including the Lucky Brand Foundation.

"It's made a major difference in many families' lives and a pretty big difference in the rest," says Peter, BA speech communication '77. "It gives them something to look forward to, to experience and to celebrate. It gives them memories and the will to try to stay healthy and keep moving forward."

Island Dolphin Care offers a number of programs year round, including Dolphin Time Out—the most extensive. The five-day program accommodates eight children and their families. Some 250 families participate annually at a cost of \$2,200 per child. But, Peter notes, up to 60 percent attend at no cost thanks to donations and grants.

Each child is assigned to a therapist, and every day, he or she has a 30-minute, one-on-one classroom therapy session and a 30-minute water session with Fiji, Squirt, Sarah or Bella, Island Dolphin Care's four specially trained aquatic therapists.

The dolphins seem to enjoy the sessions as much as the children. Even before the kids get in the water, the animals ease the tension by swimming up to give their patients a

slippery, wet kiss. The children return the affection by rubbing the animals' silvery bellies, which have the texture of a hard-boiled egg.

In-water activities are tailored to the needs of each child. Milan's sessions, for example, are designed to stimulate his left side and strengthen his hand-eye coordination, which were damaged by a brain infection shortly after birth.

"We see a difference in him every time we come, and we go back home with new strategies and a lot of new information," says the 18-year-old's mother, Trusha Parmar, as she watches her son hang on to a dolphin with his weakened left arm while the animal pulls him through the water.

In addition to working atrophied muscles, the sessions help pupils build their self-esteem and motivate them to try new things, Deena explains.

"With the exception of just a few children, the kids who come here seem to quickly acclimate in this surrounding because it's very non-threatening," says Jeff Graves, one of two human therapists at Island Dolphin Care. "The dolphins are intuitive in the sense that they seem to pick up on a child's abilities and anxiety level. They tailor interaction with the children on an individual level. I'm not sure how it works, but I believe it does.

"The bonding that takes place between the therapist and child in the water with dolphins allows you to develop a really strong, fast repertoire with children," he adds. "In a traditional classroom setting, that would take a semester or even a year."

But classroom sessions are just as important as the water sessions, Deena notes. The three classrooms are littered with drying art projects, toys, games, sandboxes and pictures of dolphins and other marine life. Therapists disguise the classroom work that needs to be done with finger paint, music and chocolate bars. And unlike the water sessions, the whole family can participate in the indoor activities.

"I think I've drawn from every class I ever took, especially in education and social work, in terms of my belief that the

family needs to be involved," Deena explains. "In the classroom, we provide the opportunity for parents and siblings to strengthen relationships and play with one another. Activities are all designed to increase hand-eye coordination, motor skills and socialization skills."

In addition to therapy, Island Dolphin Care offers other services to its community. The programs, many of them free, include day camps for hospitalized and foster children, and educational field trips for local schools.

And, Island Dolphin Care continues to expand its programming since moving into a new building a year ago. The new facility features eight aquariums and touch-tanks full of sea life, as well as a parent library and a room for yoga and massage therapy. "Parents need to be nurtured, too," Deena says.

**B**eyond dolphins and therapy, Island Dolphin Care is about the relationships and friendships that are strengthened and created and the memories that visitors take home with them.

"My goal is that every person who comes to Island Dolphin Care leaves with something," Deena Hoagland says. "If I can do that, I'm succeeding."

"You don't come with silly expectations. You come to have a good time," adds another mother, Wendy Smith. "We come to work together as a family."

On their last trip to Island Dolphin Care from their home in England, the Smiths experienced a breakthrough with their 9-year-old son, Haydn.

Haydn, who has cerebral palsy, communicates by pointing to pictures that correspond with what he wants to say. On the final day of their trip, after Haydn was pulled from the water and dried off, his soggy fingers reached for an icon he'd never touched before.

He said, for the first time, "I love you." ■

## Teaching a therapeutic approach

**W**hen Deena and Peter Hoagland (right) attended the University of Denver, animal-assisted therapy wasn't part of the curriculum.

It is now.

Last year, DU's Graduate School of Social Work (GSSW) introduced a certificate in animal-assisted social work—the only program of its kind in the country.

"Animals are found in nearly every aspect of life, and the literature is replete with documentation of the beneficial effects of animals on human health, well-being and motivation," says Phil Tedeschi, a GSSW clinical assistant professor.

Research has shown that integrating animals into social work can develop and enhance non-verbal communication, assertiveness, creative thinking and problem solving, leadership, work effectiveness, acceptance of responsibility, risk-taking, teamwork, social skills, confidence and

attitude, Tedeschi adds.

So far, three students have completed DU's animal-assisted social work certificate, and nine others are enrolled in the program. The program draws on nationally endorsed, empirically supported best practices to teach students theoretical and application competencies. In addition to course work, students are required to complete an internship in a program or agency that either offers animal-assisted social work or is interested in developing it.

GSSW also offers a non-credit animals and human health online certificate.

"These certificate programs are exciting opportunities to explore the human-animal bond and the potential for therapeutic intervention with animals to support improvement in human physical, social, emotional and cognitive function," Tedeschi says.

Visit [www.du.edu/gssw](http://www.du.edu/gssw) for more information.

