

# Scouts take the plunge

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The weather forecast said nothing about conditions for a diving accident.

There were clear skies above Tampa Bay. Murky water below had reduced visibility to a few feet. Half a dozen children from Valrico to Palm Harbor were planning to practice for a scuba emergency.

They found trouble about an hour into a morning dive. One less set of snorkel and fins bobbed to the water's surface. From the water, a Valrico mother sounded the alarm.

"I don't see Collin," Victoria Parker shouted to the crew on the boat.

Words to stop a parent's heart. To freeze the Boy Scout leader in charge. To get adrenaline racing for emergency responders waiting for a call like this.

"Coast Guard Office, St. Petersburg," said Walt Jaap, a research scientist and diving safety expert, as he radioed for help, alerting a helicopter rescue team on standby. To avoid panic, Jaap added: "This is a drill. We have a simulated diving accident."

No matter. The children who call themselves Scuba Scouts train like the pros.

"We're out diving, training for safety stuff," said Taylor Parker, a student at Mulrennan Middle. "Things that you would not expect a 12-year-old to do."



Even before the live helicopter rescue, these kids got to do things others only dream of. Dive in the Florida Keys. Map artificial reefs. Learn scientific methods for a fish count.

The organization began as an offshoot of Boy Scout Troop 422, based in Dunedin. Scoutmaster Dave Olson worried that children were dropping out of Scouting programs in their teenage years. Olson, who lives in Palm Harbor, wanted to find something for his teenage daughter and encourage her enthusiasm for the marine sciences.

The Tampa Bay area offered scores of opportunities for youths to become certified scuba divers, but nothing seemed to blend the underwater activity with the science of marine ecology. Olson aimed to com-



"Victim" Collin Olson, 14, of Palm Harbor awaits transfer to the Coast Guard boat. A dummy in a black wet suit would actually be airlifted.

bine both with Scuba Scouts, which he started in 2001.

"The kids actually go down and do the science and come back and post it on the Web and make sense of it," he said.

He connected with Jaap, a senior researcher at the Florida Fish and Wildlife Research Institute, to teach the kids the science of coral identification and recognizing different species of fish. Local outfitters discounted equipment and boats and provided trainers to get the group started. This summer, Scuba Scouts will spend a week studying hurricane damage to coral reefs in the Keys.

A captain in the Naval Reserve, Olson has military contacts who have opened doors for Scuba Scouts. He connected with the Coast Guard, which was looking to practice emergency rescue procedures. Olson's Scouts will get a special certification in scuba safety. And what better way to teach safety than practicing a live helicopter rescue?



On the day of the rescue, the Scuba Scouts were joined by a new member. Emergency responders called the dummy in a black wet suit Rescue Randy.

The boat, chartered through Treasure Island Divers, headed half a

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Scuba Scouts is open to boys and girls ages 12 to 18. Children don't have to be Scouts to join. Membership fees are \$15 per quarter. Our Ocean Dreams and Bill Jackson's in Pinellas County are chief supporters, helping to open the program to youth of all backgrounds. Although enrollment is open for science classes, limited spaces are available for diving training. Scuba Scouts is a nonprofit group looking for financial donors to expand the program. Visit [www.scubascouts.org](http://www.scubascouts.org) for more information.

mile into Tampa Bay, just off Lassing Park in St. Petersburg.

About 15 divers plunged into the water, including several parents and adult volunteers. In the calm waters, they practiced how to rescue a diver with a cramp, a diver who became irrational during the ascent, a diver who ran out of air underwater.

Then came the team exercise. Someone had to disappear.

Scout leaders picked Collin Olson, the 14-year-old son of the Scoutmaster, because he was an experienced diver. Plus, his slight frame could be lifted onto the boat easily.

The exercise began with a few giggles, then turned serious. Despite the murky water, divers were able to quickly find Collin. They hoisted him onto the boat on a flat board.

"Collin, stay unconscious," Olson said. He watched closely as 12-year-olds Taylor Parker of Valrico, joined by Savannah and Santannah Manning of North Tampa, administered oxygen. Patterns learned in practice could be lifesavers in an emergency.

Jaap called in the updates to the Coast Guard. "We have recovered the diver. . . . We have the Coast Guard vessel in sight. . . . We are the largest vessel," he radioed, as Scuba Scouts listened attentively.

Soon the Coast Guard pulled up and Collin was transferred to the rescue boat. An officer snagged Randy, the life-sized dummy, to replace Collin during the dangerous airlift. The children were silent as the rescue team practiced several passes, raising Randy in a basket and lowering cold sodas and chips.

The overriding conclusion: "Very cool."

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