



GIVE THEM A WEEK
THEY WILL REMEMBER
FOREVER

DIVING BACK INTO LIFE

RETURNING TO THE OCEAN TRANSFORMS
PERSONAL TRAGEDY INTO A SOULFUL HEALING
FOR A KIDS SEA CAMP FATHER

Photo by Abby Zanelli, age 11

I am Paul Zanelli, a volunteer fireman and EMT for over 35 years, a husband, father and now an amputee.

I had spent 33 days confined to a hospital bed, after crushing my right foot during a home project.

When I opened my eyes the morning of December 23, 2016, minus a leg, I looked up at the hospital room TV to see a one-legged superstar running a Spartan race. It was like God was trying to show me a new world of possibilities.

Christmas was spent in the hospital with my family and friends. So many people came to visit, and as much joy as that brought to me, it was hard seeing the pain and sorrow in their eyes. I was out of pain! I was going to be OK! I did not need them to feel sorry for me. I became determined to stay strong and lead a normal life.

I came home from the hospital on December 27 with equal measures of hope and fear. One of the first people to reach out to me was Margo Peyton, owner of Kids Sea Camp, and the call she

made to me was the start of a new and wonderful relationship with her, my family and diving.

I met Margo and her husband Tom Peyton the year before at Kids Sea Camp (KSC) in Roatan, Honduras. It had been a dream come true for us. Cindy and I were avid divers for over a decade, but after having children, dive trips were replaced with Disney and water parks.

We stumbled upon KSC when the kids turned 10 and wanted to dive too. In Roatan, we dove and made friends with other adults, while the kids were getting certified and making friends of their own. It felt great for all of us to finally be diving together. We planned on diving, it is a big part of our life, and had booked another KSC trip for Spring Break 2017 in Dominica at the Fort Young Hotel and Buddy Dive Dominica.

While lying in the hospital bed in December, the doctors told me there was no way that I would be diving in April. It was only 4 months away, so I sadly told my wife to cancel our family vacation, and in perfect Cindy form, she said NO!

Keeping that trip scheduled was one of the best decisions ever. My family needed this trip and so did I. I wanted to show my kids (and myself) that life would be as good or better than before. And what made it all come together was this unexpected call from Margo. She had been following my story on Facebook, with lots of love and prayers throughout.

Margo called to tell me she had made all the arrangements for me with a handicap room, an HSA instructor, some big strong dive guides to help me in and out of the water and anything else I could possibly need to make this work. She even arranged the land excursions that ensured no far walks for me or a path where I could be driven to the top of the fort or waterfalls.

To top it all off, she even purchased me a Sub Gravity underwater scooter through her non-profit foundation, Oceanwishes.org.

The scooter was small, compact and easy to use. It could be used with one arm or two. The scooter provided assistance diving if I got



tired, and was a whole lot of fun. Margo loves challenges and is one of the most loving people I have ever met. She proudly proclaimed, "Paul, we got this!", and with that launched me into getting back in shape, and continuing to plan our dream dive trip to Dominica.

Margo and I connected in NJ at the Beneath the Sea Dive show in March. She was elated to see me walking with my new prosthetic leg, and introduced me to 'Dive Heart' to get neutrally buoyant fins to fit my new foot. I was excited about the Scuba Pro fins and meeting some great people, who were already doing what I was still dreaming about.

We arrived in Dominica just 4 months after my surgery. I was walking on my new prosthetic, carrying the underwater scooter, and a swim prosthetic (Aqua Leg) strapped to my backpack. Fort Young Hotel was beautiful and located right on the water with our room looking out to the ocean. Buddy Dive was ready and waiting for me. I spent the first full day trying out my new

Aqua leg, learning to use my new dive gear and getting comfortable diving. Niels, who runs Buddy Dive, was ready to assist in any way, so I jumped in for a checkout dive off the dock. That was the greatest feeling in the world, my friends. I cannot describe the freedom and joy I felt getting back in the water and descending to depth, and diving again. After my awesome checkout dive, it was game on!

I had my family around me, and that family now included the Whites and the Peytons.

We were so fortunate to have the friends we met last year in Roatan, Jay & Lisa White and their boys reconnect with us in Dominica. They brought an extra scooter and a shared passion for hunting Lionfish. Cindy, Lisa and Margo were focusing on underwater photography, and the kids were scootering around together and having a blast. Life was great again!

Buddy Dive in Dominica accommodates every level of diver, and it was easy for me and the kids. We enjoyed diving with adults on our own boats

in the mornings and then dove as a family every afternoon. We had fun looking for Sperm whales and I even jumped off the top of the Buddy Express boat with all the kids! Abby and JAZ took a digital photo class with Margo and shot some amazing underwater images. We ate fresh Lionfish fritters and ceviche each night.

Margo and Tom always put safety first and that made our trip stress free. It was just what my soul needed, and all made possible by Next Step Orthopedics, and Kids Sea Camp's 'We Got This' mentality.

It was hard to say goodbye, but we are busy planning our next KSC trip to Belize this March!

Story by Paul Zanelli, father, husband, diver, EMT and all-round inspirational human being.

