

ARTSPEAK: DWB-- Diving while Black

Written by Irma McClaurin, PhD, Culture and Education Editor
Thursday, 03 November 2011 00:00



My first memory of moving underwater wasn't real. At 8 years, old I participated in a special science summer program for what we would now call "gifted" children; I wrote a play in which the setting was the sea. The main character was a young girl who finds a seahorse that takes her on a magical journey underwater.

Never mind that I had not even visited the ocean or the sea, and never mind that I couldn't swim. My imagination -- which is immensely powerful when we are younger-- carried me to unknown places and introduced me to an enchanted new world, well, of which I could only dream.

In September, I finally made that dream my reality. I went scuba diving for the first time. And, I was blessed to be guided on this underwater adventure not by a seahorse, but truly by a man of the sea-- Mr. Eric Wederfoort, master diver and Curaçao's oldest and most renown diver at age 79. I have been told that the grandson of the legendary Jacques Cousteau seeks out Eric as a diving partner whenever he visits the island.

Like "*Dancing with the Stars*," diving is a partner activity. You would be foolish to dive alone according to Eric. There are too many unknowns— a partner assures greater safety and instills confidence. And just as the celebrities and unknowns of "*Dancing with the Stars*" have learned that it takes hard work and only gets better with practice, the same is true of diving.

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Oh, and did I mention that the number of people of African descent who dive as a leisure sport or who gain certification as Master Divers are few and far between. In 2000, diving attracted the attention of the African American community with the release of the film “Men of Honor,” the story of Carl Brashear, a Black Navy diver and amputee, starring Cuba Gooding, Jr. and Robert DeNiro (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0203019/>).

On a recent Minneapolis airport encounter with Dave, who is a Master Diver, I was informed that the Navy has named a ship after Brashear to honor him. Dave indicated that in his twenty years of diving he had actually seen plenty of African Americans in Navy diving school; however, very few seemed to attain the Master Diver status. He also told me that the number of women Master Divers is even smaller.

Once upon a time, the same was true of tennis until Arthur Ashe hit the nets and now the Williams sisters (Serena and Venus) have become tennis legends.

And how many Black golfers could we name before Tiger Woods -- whom I claim as a brother, albeit a confused one, even if he doesn't claim himself—came on the green? Golf courses, once the last of the great white spaces, now resemble microcosms of the United Nations.

According to the founders of the National Association of Black Scuba Divers (NABS), Dr. Jose Jones and Ric Powell, in 1991, they were among the first civilian African Americans to be certified. Since founding the organization, whose stated mission is to “...foster camaraderie among African American divers, and to address the unique problems and concerns of the African-American community,” and educate people about conservation of the environment, their numbers have grown to 2,000 members in the United States and globally.

In the Caribbean, however, where most of the countries are islands, Eric Wederfoort is unique. He began diving as a young boy in Curaçao in 1955, when there were no diving schools on the island. Today the diving school in Boca Sami that Eric founded years ago and bears his name now has new Dutch owners. Down the road a bit, a retired Eric operates his own diving organization called “Sublime Diving,” managed by one of his former students. Eric and his wife Yolanda (also one of his former students) are the main instructors. He dives twice a day, three times a week. His students are Dutch, Curaçaoan, American, Venezuelan, and they range in age from early teens to seniors. It takes six dives, and hours of learning to plan your dive to become certified. Eric often informs his students of things “...that are not found in the books.”

The gear needed to dive makes it an elite sport-- not out of reach, but one that requires effort and a willingness to invest a little hard-earned cash. You will need a wet suit, goggles, air tanks, flippers, a weighted belt-- access to deep water, a dive book to record, and a partner.

According to Eric, you also will need time to plan the dive and recover. In total, each of my diving lessons spanned almost five hours. This time included testing the equipment to be sure of the right fit and that it worked properly, and then detailed instructions from my diving guru on underwater breathing, how to relieve underwater ear pressure, hand signals, what to do if you get water in your goggles or drop your mouthpiece, reassurance that I would not be alone, and how to plan your dive according to the depths you will go.

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Underwater, Eric keeps a pad for writing and uses hand signals to check if I am okay and remind me to exhale more and relieve the pressure in my ears.

My deepest dive was ten meters or thirty-three feet. On the first dive, my bottom time (how long it takes to descend, rest on the bottom, and ascend with safety rests) was forty-five minutes. My second dive totaled seventy minutes.

As a professor, I know about learning as a process. Difficult content can be easily mastered if you have a good teacher, and simply knowing a subject does not make you a good teacher.

Eric Wederfoort is a former nurse with expertise in handling patients with mental illnesses. He was recently honored by Curaçao for his expertise as a medical professional, and this experience in working with people under stress makes him an ideal teacher. His patience is genuine, and he makes no assumptions about his students. He constantly interrogated my comfort level above water and below.

And so, if you are feeling adventuresome, and up for a challenge, or if you want a truly magical experience--according to an old seahorse friend of mine-- diving is the answer. And, if you happen to be in Curaçao, I can recommend an experienced and patient dive teacher. For more information on African Americans and diving, see the links below.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carl_Brashear

<http://www.nabsdivers.org/>

<http://www.blackcoraldivers.org/>

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