

In the beginning...

Do you want to make a difference? Well that was a question I asked of myself three years ago. A friend and diving student of mine suggested combining an activity based on his work as a fire fighter and a diving activity in a programme for vulnerable or 'at risk' children.



These aren't your run of the mill youngsters. They might not have what society will call a normal childhood. Some might be youngsters who have demonstrated against the odds their true spirit and determination to succeed.

Three years ago a few of us with the blessing of the BSAC invented the "Best Buddy" programme. This year was different though and possibly more special. Why? Quite

honestly, its raised profile. The programme was represented at a party thrown by No 10 on the back the programme's success in 2003 and this event raised the stakes somewhat.

Fun became serious...

The bureaucracy increased, people's anxiety over the risks increased and more importantly people's vision of the programme started widening. For these basic reasons, the 2004 version of the programme had to be as near perfect as possible because it was now acting as the potential model for a national programme instead of a local borough of Greater London.



This meant the 2004 programme had to be a legitimate partnership, legalised in a contract of obligation between the London Fire Brigade, Connexions, Worth Unlimited and the BSAC.

It's really surprising how something so simple can become so leaden when words have to appear in black and white sealed with signatures of acceptance. Nevertheless a mutually acceptable contract was drawn and

signed in the 11th hour just minutes before the start of the wet side of the programme. We the BSAC were responsible for the staffing, exercise management and control of the wet side. To this end we had 3 core activities, Snorkelling, Water Safety and SCUBA. These events were rerun over two days enabling us to accommodate 20 youngsters each day. On each day the youngsters were split into three groups and rotated around the exercises.

On the day...

Alan Cooke was ably helped by Michael Selby in running the snorkelling session and it was an amazing sight watching a group of water shy youngsters evolve into competitive ping pong ball and spoon racers. There is no doubt that all attendees of this year will be able to maximise their pleasure when given the opportunity to snorkel again, perhaps on holiday.

The SCUBA session was staffed by BSAC qualified instructors. Each instructor was briefed that they were working on a one-2-one basis with the youngsters and they were to use their experience in bringing the youngsters forward in the art of SCUBA. If I thought the snorkelling was amazing then so too was the SCUBA. The youngsters were communicating with their instructors and anyone else who bothered to ask... underwater! Up, Down, Slowly,

Are you OK, I'm OK and I'm very OK. It was plain to see and obvious that the SCUBA session was a big hit all round and full credit to the instructors.

It must be said, that this year was made considerably easier by having equipment that was specifically sized for the youngsters and there is a huge debt of gratitude owed to Beaver Sports (York) Ltd for supplying us with masks, snorkels, fins and

BCDs at absolutely rock bottom prices funded by Connexions. Our local dive shop 'Dive Force Marine' supplied us air in tanks provided by the University of London Sub Aqua Club (ULSAC). These cylinders were from the Chiswick area and the project was in Walthamstow. Anyone familiar with London will know these places are practically diagonally opposite each other across London, yet without a murmur of discord Richard Ayers carted them in his trusty vehicle from A to B and back again.



The third programme was water safety run by Chris Mehegan ably assisted by myself.



snorkelling.

We had the short straw or so it seemed. How could we possibly compete with Snorkelling and SCUBA? We set about showing the youngsters that no matter how big or small or well they could swim, they could make a real difference effecting a water rescue. We had a “rope” throwing, “bag” throwing, “pole” reaching, “float” towing screaming time. We had rescue relays but no matter what we did we just couldn’t compare to the thrill of SCUBA and the joy of

So who are these knights of the underwater world:

Catherine Gray (WFSAC) – Scuba Instructor
Richard Ayers (Ealing SAC) – Scuba Instructor
Vinodini Patel (WFSAC) – Scuba Instructor
Peter Clark (WFSAC) – Scuba Instructor
Alan Cooke (WFSAC) - Snorkel Instructor
Michael Selby (WFSAC) – Snorkel Assistant
Chris Mehegan (WFSAC) – Water Safety
Sid Lothian (898 HELFINS) – Scuba Instructor
Jimmy Cook (ULSAC) – Scuba Instructor
Sam Denby (ULSAC) – Scuba Instructor
Kristof Bostoen (ULSAC) – Water safety casualty



A big thank you must also go to all those people who lent their regulators and other equipment for the duration of the project.

In all, the above people gave up two days of their lives to help alter the lives of 40 youngsters. We think it was successful and judging by the reaction of all the youngsters who attended, it’s hard to believe it was anything else.

Now the challenge is to raise the stakes and run this programme elsewhere across London, across the UK, possibly in your area.

So, do you want to make a difference?

Darin Edmunds (WFSAC) - Instructor