

WHAT'S IT'S ALL ABOUT

BY DR. TERRY MAAS^



Spearfishermen welcome, imagine that! Founder of Diving For A Cause (DFAC), Colleen Gallagher, has struck upon a magical mix for a week's spearfishing adventure -- fun and giving back. While enjoying spearfishing in exotic locals, participants have the opportunity to give something of themselves to their hosts. They donate their fish, plant trees, help paint and supply local schools, and introduce children to the wonders of the ocean at their doorstep.

The DFAC team organizes trips by researching worthy venues, often in countries south of the equator, where trip participants have an opportunity to support the local community. I love this concept. How many times have you traveled to a foreign country and felt a tug of guilt as you travel to your dive location, passing by neighborhoods in obvious need? Sure, some donated fish and a few days of community service can be viewed as a token-

ism. However, these deeds can have a lasting impact on the children and the communities.

While surfing Facebook, I happened upon a picture of a group of happy divers, standing in the surf, sporting grins and quality fish. The scene was familiar to me. Eleven years earlier contestants in an International Blue Water Spearfishing Records Committee (IBRSC) gold cup stood on the same beach holding a similar catch. After a few days musing over the DFAC picture, a not-so-subtle difference emerged. I'm not knocking spearfishing contests—I love them—but the group dynamics were clearly different.

Our highly competitive group of divers had spent their energy working on strategies and skills that culminate in a tournament yielding one winner and 20 losers. The spearos in the DFAC group were all winners. They directed their energies working together in a communi-

ty-service project. Besides donating their fish to a local orphanage, the divers taught the kids how to snorkel, using masks they brought for the orphanage to keep. The divers introduced the new snorkelers to the wonders of the reef just beyond the surf for the first time. Now, that's giving back.

Almost once a month, the DFAC team picks a location and begins to lay the groundwork with local correspondents, usually local divers or dive-business entrepreneurs, who see the win-win of hosting a group of spearfishermen interested in their local community. DFAC arranges discounts for boats, meals and lodging and finds worthy institutions for their service goals.

Trips typically last a week, which includes two travel days, leaving five for trip activities. Participants receive a detailed information package before their trip and then the divers join up on site for a pre-dive orientation, which includes information on the fish most likely to yield the greatest value for the benefit of the local charity. Here divers will learn about the local customs and the institutions that they will interact with on their days of service. Divers usually spend the next two days diving and enjoying spearfishing. The following day, the group participates in community service. The next day they dive again, and the last day is again devoted to service. While there are usually 8 spearos, participants are encouraged to bring significant others to join the trip. Non-divers are welcome to join trips as well.

Colleen is supported by her capable board members, corporate officers, Treasurer David Nelson and Secretary David Dawkins. A helpful DFAC Advisory Board guides the DFAC team led by Dr. Terry Maas, Michael Brookins, Ben Hyson, Brian Kiddy, Joshua Russo, Michael Scaglione and Bobby Kim. DFAC has been recognized as an IRS designated charitable organization (501C3), which means that participants may deduct most, if not all of their trip fees. (You'll have to check with your own accountant.)

Colleen is an accomplished ICU charge nurse who also trains new nurses in the nuances of critical nursing. Having raised two great boys, loving and sharing comes naturally to her. Like many of us, she started her diving career using scuba. Her close friendship with Northern California spearo Bonnie Row drew her to freediving and now her tanks gather dust while she travels the globe. A visionary, Colleen connected the dots in her life—giving, service to others and spearfishing—and developed an organization with a mission that resonates with spearos.

This usually low-key gal, who is happy with pan-sized fish, is no slouch when it comes to spearfishing. Her world record marlin, recognized by both the IBRSC and IUSA, was landed just four years after she began freediving. She is certain that her now deceased mentor Bonnie was with her every moment as she speared and landed her record catch on her inaugural DFAC trip.



Left side: Happy children from La Ciudad de los Niños y Niñas
Right side: DFAC in La Paz, Mexico (2011)

Participants and recipients both share in their praise for DFAC events. Josh Russo, a frequent DFAC diver says, "I was honored to be a part of the 2011 DFAC Nicaragua trip. We went down with high hopes and no one was disappointed. We sold the fish we speared at the market to pay for the chemicals to fumigate the town and treat all the standing water. We donated ten fans to the clinic because it has few windows, poor air circulation, and people were reluctant to see a doctor when it was hot. We packed as many school supplies in our bags as we could with the weight restrictions and donated over 125 pounds to the children. (Stickers are the big thing with Nica children.) With what was left over, we bought a pig, had a BBQ, and fed the entire town one night. We passed out candy for the children as we went door-to-door with a representative from the government to ask for permission to treat the standing water, and the parents eyes were glistening as much as the children's at the thought of a hard candy treat. It felt like we really made a difference in these people's lives and the truth is, it made a big difference in our lives as well."

In La Paz, Mexico Josh remembers, "The kids were all over us when we went to visit them at their orphanage. They were so happy to see us. The kids that we'd snorkeled with on Wednesday ran up to their dive buddy with their friends and we all laughed and joked. Then we went inside for dinner and a presentation of the fish to the children and certificates of appreciation for the divers. It was an incredible feeling to see how grateful they were for our efforts. We played soccer well into the night, laughing and joking. When it was time to leave you could tell it was too soon because no one wanted to leave and some of the kids were grabbing us by the arms as if to keep us from leaving. The language communication may not have been fluent but the feelings were mutual. We were all grateful for the efforts and the friendships made that week. DFAC is awesome. The impact that it has on the children is only part of the gift, the impact on the divers and others who hear about what we're doing is incredible. I won't soon forget the experience, and I look forward to going back and being able to do better for the children."

Tim Hatler of Palapas Ventana is one of the local representatives. "Diving for a Cause comes back again and again to the same town - my town where I live and work - I work with them on ongoing projects that do make a difference - our schools get painted, parks get shade trees - next trip we will paint a mural, raise money for a shade roof - little by little these projects add up - DFAC will continue to improve our town park each trip as well - And the fish donation? It goes a long way. Thanks Colleen and all the DFAC divers I can't wait till you guys return in April."

Santiago Olachea works for the Catholic orphanage in

La Paz as an outreach coordinator. He says, "Padre Fernando and the kids were super happy to meet DFAC and are so thankful for your donation and the wonderful time they experienced with DFAC group. The diving session (where seasoned divers took children to see the reefs) with the group at Palapas Ventana, really touched the kids hearts, all the way back the kids were talking about their water experience and the great friends they just met. Definitely, friendship and kindness do not need language to communicate."

National Champion Brandi Easter recalls, "I was impressed at the diversity of people, divers and non-divers, from all over the U.S., Canada and Mexico who participated in 2011 April La Paz DFAC, all who shared the same desire to give back."

Another participant Matthew Davidchuk says, "The DFAC April 2011 trip to La Paz, Mexico was amazing. Meeting and snorkeling with the orphans from La Paz was something I'll never forget. We were paired up one diver with one orphan and despite the language barrier showed them the basics of using a mask, snorkel and fins, then went out to explore together the rich sea life in the nearby reef - a truly magical experience!"

Speaking about the Hatteras North Carolina trip, diver Atil Tosun says, "The July 18 to 23 fundraiser to benefit the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation is a great example of Diving For a Cause's philanthropic mission: in this case focusing on one foundation devoted to a specific disease. Diving for a Cause makes awareness a two-way street. Freedivers highlight spearfishing to an audience that may not know the physical endurance, focused attitude, and spirit required to do the sport. By choosing a disease-specific foundation, DFAC brings the attention of freedivers to the physical endurance, focused attitude and spirit required to live with that disease. DFAC selected the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation for its July, 2011 event, and the American Cancer Society for its August event, after being inspired by individuals with a specific connection to freediving and spearfishing."

If you are looking for a fun week's spearfishing, with a dual purpose, please take a look at the possibilities on the DFAC website, www.divingforacause.org. The difference you make in the lives of others will enrich your own. ■

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Top left: Eric Smail; Top right: Brandi Easter
Bottom: Chris Dawkins



Top Left and this page: Brandon Nunez
Bottom Left: DFAC team in the Bahamas