

Lakhoos
Since 1904

THE Raymond SHOP
Al Araiimi Complex, Qurum,
Tel: 24561142

- Custom made tailoring facility available
- Raymond special uniform materials available
- Open on Fridays
- Wholesale enquiries welcome

Raymond
SINCE 1925

PARX
SIMPLY FINEST QUALITY

Park Avenue
RAYMOND

Winter Season - NEW LATEST RANGE OF RAYMOND BLANKET ARRIVED AT REASONABLE PRICE.

ACORSA SPANISH OLIVES

Al Maya International
Tel.: 24591017, 24501641, 24501642

Dive into fun and therapy

David Solomon talks to two physically challenged scuba divers to learn about their first plunge into the waters



IMAGINE you haven't walked for years because you've lost the use of your legs following a road accident. Wherever you go, you have to move around in a wheelchair. And suddenly you discover that you can fly and that too without a pair of wings. Is this some kind of a wild fantasy, some extraordinary kind of dream? Or is this some kind of a fairy tale? Not at all. It is just a group of physically challenged people who have suddenly been introduced to the excitement and thrill of the underwater world through scuba diving. They find that under water, the natural buoyancy of water helps them move around with almost the same sort of fleetness and mobility of the fish and other forms of marine life that abound in the sea. This new-found ability to move around in the water effortlessly is almost akin to the sensation of flying.

And that is why this story has such strong overtones of a fairy tale, which has a Fairy Godmother too - Stefanie Trier. She's the diving instructor in Oman who suddenly came up with the brainwave of introducing differently abled people to a brave new world under the sea. A simple idea that has already changed the lives of many differently abled people and possibilities of what could happen in the future are almost limitless.

Together with the indefatigable energy and drive of Tarek Jawad Al Khabori, Stefanie was soon able to get the necessary approval and clearance from the ministries of social development and sports affairs. With that done it did not take much time to get the involvement of the International Association of Handicapped Divers (IAHD), which is headquartered in Germany.

The high-water mark and culmination of all the pioneering efforts and initiative of Stefanie and Tarek was the participation of a seven-member team of IAHD experts, who spent around four days in Oman, between March 16 and 20, introducing members of the Oman Association for the Disabled to the thrills and adventure of scuba diving. In the process, history has been made with Oman becoming the first ever country in the Middle East where scuba diving has been introduced in this way for the differently abled.

Two wheelchair-bound people - Marhoun and Saif - who on Wednesday, March 18, became the very first to take the plunge into fantasy world beneath the Deep Blue, are beyond themselves with excitement and are unable to contain their happiness and exultation that keeps brimming over.

They eagerly begin to recount their splash in the ocean, words spilling out in a flurry of emotions. Says Saif: "I cannot express my feelings. But yes, all I can say is that when I was under the water, I could actually feel that I'm a new person with a new-found ability to move unaided under the sea.

Marhoun adds: "For the first time in my life I could actually forget that



I'm suffering from any kind of handicap, that I'm whole and perfect."

Both Marhoun and Saif are touched and overwhelmed by the extreme kindness and patience shown by the IAHD diving instructors during the course of the training programme. "We didn't know that there was such a beautiful world that exists beneath the sea, a world that opens up vistas of possibilities for people like us."

Stefanie explains that one specific reason why this training programme was such a success was because the IAHD had taken care to send diving instructors who were themselves physically challenged. "It makes a world of a difference having differently abled diving instructors. When they do something as instructors, it sends out a strong positive signal - a signal that says that if a physically challenged instructor can do it, so can a challenged learner. This enables the learners to go into the programme with a positive frame of mind and learn quickly."

The two IAHD diving instructors who came with the team from Germany included Olof Winkler and Robert Patzker. Olof was a motocross racing enthusiast, who lost the use of his lower limbs in a racing accident. Robert lost his left leg below the knee after an amputation following an accident. He moves around with a prosthetic limb. Both are dedicated divers and took special care to make the disabled learners comfortable and at ease in the water. Both these diving instructors were struck by the keenness and sincerity of the Omani divers.

Daniel Zuidema, from Amsterdam, Holland, who was here with the IAHD team as their marketing director, also has a disability. But it is one that you might not notice until he extends his right arm to shake hands with you. Only then do you notice that his right forearm is an artificial limb, so he

has to do all his normal work with his left hand.

Miriam Prumer was the physio-therapist in the team. She says that she usually works once a week with people suffering disability problems following spinal cord injuries. According to her scuba diving "has tremendous therapeutic value. The combined effect of the buoyancy in the water plus the pressure under water help stimulate muscular activity and the motor nerves in the damaged areas of the body". She cited cases of muscular dystrophy where the process of muscular degeneration had been reversed after the people concerned had taken up scuba diving.

All the other members of the IAHD team were more than satisfied with the tremendous response by the disabled in Oman to take up diving. They all hope that this kind of exchange and dialogue between Oman and the IAHD would continue on a regular basis and that in the future a more specialised programme could be planned.

