



Clear Vision

Shawn Nasseri's mission is straightforward, certify more divers to help save the oceans

By KIMBERLY KING
Photos by G. FRANK HART

IT'S 7 P.M. ON A MONDAY NIGHT, AND WHILE 47-YEAR-OLD Shawn Nasseri's job running a multi-million dollar software company called Computersoft is done for the day, his second gig, he's most passionate about, has just begun.

"We're going green, no more paper!," the trained captain and certified dive instructor with the infectious personality exclaims to his class, as he hands each student a one gigabyte flash drive. The drive is filled with quizzes, nearly 300 slides, "your entire instructor's manual and, all your homework. You've got to do it!" Now before you cry Uncle at the thought of going back to class, read on. Shawn has a captive audience, and you simply can't help but want to learn from him. Tonight's group, about ten men and

women of all ages, have clocked off their day jobs for a series of night classes to become certified scuba diving instructors. Many are well aware of Shawn's reputation, teaching thousands of first-time divers while keeping all of them safe.

"We have a 100% perfect record. Our accident record is zero. It's something I'm extremely proud of."

His passion for diving began more than two decades ago when Shawn worked for Duke University's Medical Center in Durham, writing software programs for their microbiology department.

"I dove at a place called Water World. I got certified and fell in love with diving. It was the only time I had no stress. Once I entered the ocean no one could call me, no one could talk to me. All I could hear was bubbles, and all I could see was fish."

He continued working for Duke, but the self-described workaholic also started his own software company on the side. And if that wasn't enough, he started taking PhD level classes at Duke, working towards a degree in computer science.

"I was taking my second class and I got a call from Glaxo Wellcome." The big pharma company, now known as GlaxoSmithKlein, wanted Shawn to write software for them. "I was working really hard. I had to leave my PhD program, but Duke actually became my client."

At the same time his start-up was taking off. "It became super successful to the point where I quit all my other jobs."

His company was based in Cary, but Shawn's family was in Wilmington. He decided to make a move to be closer to them. But in the back of his mind, his dream was still very much alive.

"I told a friend of mine, I want to open a dive shop. And, he told me you need money. He said it takes two million dollars to open a professional dive shop. That's exactly what he told me don't do the wrong thing. Don't kill people."

Shawn never forgot those words. In 1996, with the move to Wilmington, Shawn continued to grow his firm. The company, he says, creates software to make businesses more efficient.

After moving to Wilmington, Shawn continued to dive. But as his passion grew, so too did his frustration that, in his opinion, the coastal beach town didn't have a true professional dive shop.

"People kept coming to me telling me, Shawn, why don't you open a dive shop."

Thirteen years passed. Shawn had now finally saved enough money to open the kind of operation his friend had so impressed upon him to do. And in 2009, Scuba-Now officially opened its doors.

"We started with 1,000 square feet, now we are 8,000." And he proudly boasts, "Everything is paid for."

"You see these buildings, all of these



units are owned. The boats we have are worth \$350,000 each. They're paid for. The pool I have where I train people to dive. It's all paid for. The reason I did that is because I didn't want to worry about rent. Safety is the highest priority in diving. Money is second. You have to understand that."

The shop recently added a 35-foot new dive boat to its fleet, "Shawncy's Revenge," named after Shawn's beloved labrador retriever who does great stunts diving down underwater, swimming after Frisbees. Change is also underway at the training swimming pool, where a construction crew is transforming a former residential home into showers, lockers and a changing area, making things more convenient for scuba students.

"My mission has always been to make diving affordable to everyone. I'm passionate about that. I would love to make everyone a diver. Yes, we have to sell gear, we have to train, but my vision is bigger. I love the oceans, that is one of my big things. How do you save the oceans? You get divers in the water to see what's going on."

Along with taking groups on Florida dive trips, Shawn says Wilmington's coastline has great spots for scuba as well.

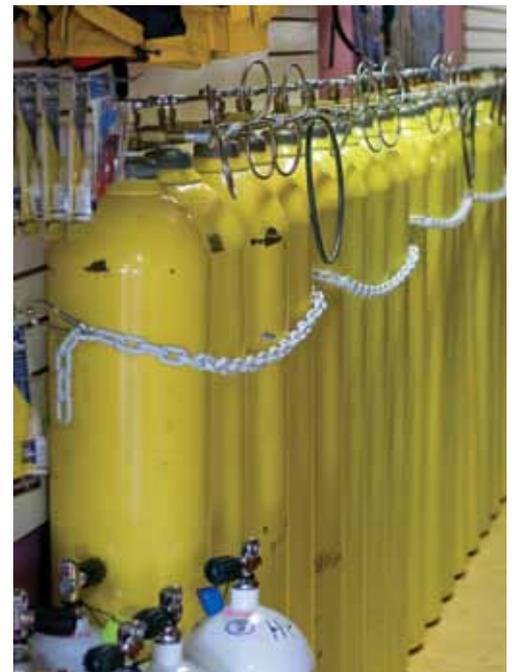
"There is the Hyde shipwreck about 20 miles off the coast. It has the most beautiful sand tiger sharks all over, with 40 to 60 feet visibility. It's full of fish. The Liberty ship is three miles out, but you have to catch it on a good day for visibility. Sometimes you can see schools of bluefish

and bonitos, and beautiful spadefish which look like three-foot-long angel fish."

In 2012 Scuba-Now earned what Shawn considers his greatest achievement so far. NAUI, the National Association of Underwater Instructors, recognized his shop as one of the top three in the world for its outstanding record, certifying hundreds of divers safely. Shawn, ever the over-achiever, wants to become number one nationally, never forgetting his core mission: Training safe.

"You have to learn the skills. Remove your mask, remove your regulator, put it back on. There are 22 different skills they must do, plus swim 500 yards, and show us they can tread water." The store has a special Purple Heart program offering any wounded war veteran with a Purple Heart, scuba lessons for free.

Shawn is proud to tell his story, that his business has grown largely through word of mouth and customers who keep coming back. "I got recertified again here because I haven't dove in so many years," said Todd Welch, a retired South Florida police officer who now owns a surf shop in Southport. "I've been taking every course, their rescue courses, their navigation courses. Essentially I've been taking courses for the last two years. Everything





I can get my hands on."

35-year-old Lisa Sprod is a professor at UNCW specializing in exercise science. A major sports enthusiast, Lisa grew up in Colorado but has loved the water and has been diving for over ten years. "I've been

Chapman. For 25 years Frank served as UNCW's Director of Diving and Water safety, and director of the school's NOAA Underwater Research program. He knows Shawn well. The fact the store has earned NAUI's top award isn't lost on him.

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wanting to take the next step to become a scuba instructor on the side. It would fit in well with my exercise science background, and so I'm just taking advantage of this opportunity. I've heard great things about Scuba-Now and everyone I've met here's been phenomenal."

But perhaps the strongest endorsement comes from UNCW dive instructor Frank

"It's a really big deal. It's one of the biggest, most respected, certification organizations in the world."

Frank also feels Shawn is bringing in revenue to the town. "He's drawing people from all over to spend their money in the Wilmington area. Spending the night, over holidays, during the summers, and so forth. So commercially he's been good for everybody."

Shawn has a team of nine instructors and has never felt more confident about the crew he has in place. His dream is to one day franchise and expose more people to the underwater adventure sport he so loves.

"How cool would it be to go to a Scuba-Now in other cities, and for it to be a safe, friendly, professional shop where staff are always there to help you out. Money isn't the objective, but taking care of you and safety always is." 910-395-5111, scuba-now.com. **W**

