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## **Self confidence, self discovery brought forth at diving camp**

By Liz McGathey, Staff writer

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Katie Luyt has a new hobby. It's something she never would have done had it not been for the In-Water Experience Camp for the Cognitively Impaired in Little Cayman, Cayman Islands.

The program seeks to increase self-respect, independence and self-reliance among its participants, along with improving motor skills and fostering an appreciation for new friendships, group participation and the undersea world.

Katie, 20, daughter of Mary and Brian Luyt of Plano, has Cornelia deLange Syndrome (CdLS), a rare genetic disorder, a symptom of which is delayed intellectual development.

Mary Luyt said CdLS can run a wide spectrum and people with the syndrome can have health issues, limb differences and some cognitive impairments including autistic tendencies.

"Katie has a mild version although she tends to be pretty quiet in new situations with new people," Mary said.

Mary said Katie was very sick when she was an infant — she had severe reflux and didn't gain weight. At three months old, she was diagnosed with CdLS by a Montana geneticist who specializes in the condition.

The Luyts heard of the diving camp through the CdLS Foundation, in which they are involved.

John Johnston, a resident of Naples, Fla., helped launch the diving camp along with a group of dedicated volunteers. Johnston saw how learning to scuba dive was a benefit to his grandson, Timmy, who was also born with CdLS, and wanted to provide the same experience for others like Timmy. With tremendous support from Little Cayman Beach Resort, Reef Divers and the Conch Club Condo owners, the camp has just completed its third year. Through donations, all costs for each camper and a parent or caregiver are covered.

Mary said she was initially reluctant to allow Katie to attend the camp.

"The ocean's a whole new ball game — there was that fear factor," Mary said. "And when Katie gets into a new situation, we never know if she wants to participate or not. We didn't want to take a spot someone else could take."

Mary said she had to keep the trip a secret from Katie, who would not have been on board early on. She told her the day before they were to leave that they were going somewhere and she was not happy to hear the news. She said Katie was quiet and reserved the first night of camp. But by the second day, she was there to stay.

The patience and dedication of the instructors helped Katie step out of her comfort zone and give the diving a try. Mary said instruction was one-on-one, sometimes even two instructors to one student.

"They do a lot of work in the pool. They become aware of what the campers needs are and any concerns that might be expressed," she said. "They just work really hard to build a rapport with the diver. In Katie's case it was getting her to open up to her diver."

Katie and her instructor, Liz Blengino, went for walks to get to know each other and build Katie's confidence and trust.

"Most people don't see the capabilities of these young people so they seldom get a chance to belong or do things their peers do. But at camp, everyone believed in them, gave them a chance and they thrived," Mary said. "I think when a kid can do what other people can do they feel good about themselves."

Ruth Lowther, the program's coordinator, said that campers who also participate in other activities leave the camp more outgoing, talkative and confident with a "can-do" attitude.

"One of the biggest things I've seen is that it builds self confidence. They [the campers] look at challenges after they have been through the scuba diving program and are not afraid to take them on," said Nate Boutwell, Timmy's stepfather.

As Katie has gotten older, Mary said she has seen a change in her daughter. As a child, Katie was quicker to get involved with

her peers and now, as an adult, she is much more reserved.

"She doesn't have the verbal inclination to invite herself to participate," Mary said. "At camp there was this acceptance."

Mary said the whole experience was an emotional one for her because she got to see her daughter do something most other kids, impaired or not, will never get to do. She said it is much like the feeling other parents get when their children hit a homerun or score a touchdown.

She said she learned her own lesson from attending the camp with her daughter.

"This man who runs the camp says 'you gotta let go; you're the ones holding them back,' " she said. "I think we get protective and we're not sure what they can do so sometimes we do hold them back. I almost said no to this for her. It made me think 'what other times have I said no?' My reluctance almost kept her from this experience. Kids with disabilities can do more than we let them. Sometimes we can learn from them."

For information about making a contribution or about next year's camp, contact Ruth Lowther at [ruthlowther@earthlink.net](mailto:ruthlowther@earthlink.net).



*Katie Luyt, who has from Cornelia deLange Syndrome, explores the underwater world during the In-Water Experience Camp in the Cayman Islands. Submitted photo*