

THE DEEPEST DIVE

**Follow a young woman as she finds purpose
diving for sunken slave ships.**

By **Rachel Stewart**, youth diving instructor, Diving With a Purpose

SHUTTERSTOCK/ KATATONIA82

I grew up in a landlocked state: Tennessee. But, some of my fondest memories of childhood were centered on family vacations to the ocean to snorkel.

When I was 14 years old, my dad and I went snorkeling in the Bahamas. We boarded a boat as the only two snorkelers in a group of SCUBA divers. We traveled to deep water, in what felt to me like the middle of the ocean. I watched the divers gear up. To keep warm, they wore wetsuits that fit snug on their bodies. They wore vests, which held their air tanks on their backs. They wore face masks that covered their noses. On their feet, they wore large fins.

The divers buddied up, then each took a giant step off the boat. My dad and I jumped in the water and watched them descend into the blue until they disappeared. *Where did they go? I wondered. What could be down there?*

After some time, the divers resurfaced, talking excitedly about what they had seen. I wished I could've experienced it, too.

The captain of the boat took us to a second site. Here, the water was more shallow. I could clearly see to the bottom of the ocean. The captain and dive leader gave us a briefing about the site and told us we were diving on an old shipwreck!

With my mask and snorkel in place, I eagerly jumped into the water to explore. Below me, I saw the remnants of a ship scattered across the ocean floor. Some of the wreckage, covered in coral and sea life, was hard to pick out from the reef. Other pieces of the ship were large, intact, and easy to spot. Schools of fish and other creatures swam in and out of the wreck.

I swam down to get a closer look. Yet the few seconds I could hold my breath were not long enough for me to see everything I wanted to see. I had to resurface. The dive leader, though, saw my interest. He offered to take me down on SCUBA equipment. My dad and I readily agreed.

THE FIRST DEEP DIVE

The dive leader handed me his alternate regulator. This is what divers put in their mouths to breath. I held onto him as we descended. With every inhale, I could hear air flowing through the regulator and with every exhale, the bubbles tickled my face. I was thrilled to be breathing underwater.

With SCUBA equipment, I could get much closer to the wreck and see it more clearly. I was able to pick out pieces of the ship that didn't stand out to me before.

When I resurfaced, my father was waiting to congratulate me. I knew then that I wanted to be a SCUBA diver. Fortunately, one of the divers in our group told us about the National Association of Black SCUBA divers (NABS). Once back home, an internet search led me to the Tennessee Aquatic Project (TAP), a youth-based nonprofit that works to empower future leaders.

When I joined TAP, I met Mr. Ken Stewart, the group's founder. Mr. Stewart is a legend in the field of diving. He is also a ball of energy. He is passionate about involving kids in environmental and societal issues. At my first TAP meeting, I sat in the front row as he explained what TAP was all about. My eyes lit up when he started talking about diving. I was impressed by the amazing experiences divers in the program had.

MY TRAINING BEGINS

A year later, I found myself training with TAP to become a certified open water SCUBA diver. I had met other kids who looked like me who were as thrilled about diving as I was.

When you train for SCUBA, you become familiar with your equipment. You learn how to safely plan and execute dives. You learn how to perform key underwater skills. Through TAP, I was able to practice my skills almost weekly in the pool until it was time for my open water certification.

GETTING CERTIFIED

That February, another TAP youth and I headed to Florida to complete our certification. It was here where we would show all that we had learned.

Our first open water dive was at a site called Devil's Den. It's an underground cave that has an opening that lets daylight in. I was nervous swimming through its dimly lit crevices but loved the thrill of diving outside of the pool. Here, my dive buddy and I successfully demonstrated our skills and passed every test.



I'M ABOUT TO PUT MY FIN ON AFTER CHECKING ALL MY DIVE GEAR. PHOTO COURTESY OF RACHEL STEWART

Once I got my certification card in the mail, it felt official. I was now a certified open water diver. I couldn't have imagined that first unofficial dive on the wreck in the Bahamas would lead to this. I was eager to get back to the ocean to explore.

NEXT STEPS

That summer, I spent more time training and perfecting my diving skills with TAP. SCUBA divers need good buoyancy control in order to safely move underwater. With good control, we can hover over something—say a beautiful coral—without touching it. Divers can master their buoyancy control through proper use of equipment but also through their breathing techniques.

We worked on our navigation skills, too. It's easy to get disoriented underwater. So, it's important for divers to be aware of their surroundings and know how to use a compass.

We also practiced our communication skills. Because talking underwater is not possible, we "speak" nonverbally by using hand signals.

I didn't think twice about any of my training. I loved all of it. I didn't realize at the time exactly what Mr. Stewart was training us for.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF DIVE

One day, Mr. Stewart told us about a program he had created called Diving With a Purpose (DWP). Through this program, recreational divers, like me, could learn the basics of underwater archaeology and historic conservation. DWP's focus was to document and interpret shipwrecks that participated in the African slave trade.

Growing up, I had been taught about the transatlantic slave trade and the unbearable voyage captive people endured to make it to the Americas. The story of that voyage had always ended on land. I had never thought about ships that didn't make it to their destination. I started to wonder: *What history might be lost at sea?*

THE GUERRERO

Mr. Stewart told us about a particular ship — the *Guerrero*. In 1827, this Spanish ship was carrying 561 captive Africans when it was engaged in battle with a British Navy anti-slavery ship. Both ships struck a reef off the coast of Florida. The *Guerrero* sank. Forty-one Africans died during the incident.

I thought about what it might feel like to be one of the Africans on board — the fear of being taken from my home; the exhaustion of voyaging across the Atlantic under inhumane conditions; and the panic of being on board a sinking ship. I knew the search for this ship was important, and I wanted to be a part of uncovering its history.

Mr. Stewart was about to give us a chance at just that. He told us he was training us for the first week-long, all youth DWP (YDWP) program at Biscayne National Park in Homestead, Florida. We would become archaeological advocates who serve to protect and preserve underwater heritage.



LEARNING TO DOCUMENT OUR FINDINGS

To dive for shipwrecks takes even more training. My fellow divers and I learned about how ships were built during different time periods. This helped us to more accurately determine when a ship was made. We learned how to identify shipwreck artifacts underwater. Because it's rare to find straight lines and perfect circles in nature, these are good characteristics to look for when searching for artifacts.



HERE, I CAREFULLY REDRAW PART OF THE MAP SHOWING THE POSITIONS OF THE ARTIFACTS. PHOTO COURTESY OF RACHEL STEWART

Finding artifacts is an important step. Documenting what you find is the next important step. This involves plotting artifacts on a map, measuring, and drawing them. Before putting our skills to the test in the water, we practiced on land with a mock shipwreck.

Here's how it worked. Our instructors placed random objects on a grassy area for us to map. They also placed a large tape measure, called the baseline, through the center of all the "artifacts." We marked the artifacts with pin flags. Then we mapped their position in the wreck in relation to the baseline. This type of mapping is called trilateration mapping. Each artifact was mapped then measured and drawn.

After our on-land training, we had three days of diving to document a wreck. The first two wrecks that I worked on were ones the park had already documented but were good practice for us. Our group of about 25 divers was split into smaller teams, and each team was assigned a small section of the wreck to document.

Before each dive, we double- and triple-check to make sure all of our SCUBA gear is in good condition. We make sure we have the tools we need, like pin flags, tape measurers, rulers, and a compass. All of our gear is waterproof, even the paper and pencils we use.

After our dives, we spend time on land cleaning up our drawings and making a large map that shows the positions of all the artifacts.

A DEEPER COMMITMENT

After two field schools with YDWP, I had gained a lot of experience. My instructors told me that I was ready to become an instructor. I wasn't so sure! Could I really teach my peers?

One of Mr. Stewart's mottos is, "First we learn, then we teach." Although I felt a little anxious, I felt it was my duty. The lead instructors encouraged me to apply for instructor candidacy.

As a YDWP instructor candidate, my task would be to lead a small team of new and returning YDWP students in mapping our assigned section of a wreck. We were back at Biscayne National

Park, working on a wreck that had been documented before. Redocumenting wrecks is important because it keeps record of how the wreck is changing over time.

Up to now, I was comfortable being a “do’er” not a delegator or teacher. Nevertheless, I gave it my best effort and was surprised to discover that I had developed the skills I needed to be a successful instructor. After serving as an instructor in this capacity, I was ready for the next step.

IN SEARCH OF THE *GUERRERO*

My first mission as a full YDWP instructor would be in search of the *Guerrero*! I remembered everything that Mr. Stewart had told us about this ship. Now, a dive site had been identified as its potential final resting place.

I felt nervous about leading a group on such an important task, but excited, too. On the first survey dive of the site, it was difficult to pick out any potential artifacts. All that stood out to me was the reef. But when I focused closer, I could start to see pieces that were manmade. Could this be the *Guerrero*?

Throughout the week, the tension mounted. I felt the team’s eagerness to map the wreck. We documented everything as carefully and as accurately as we could. We completed a map of the wreck. And then, we waited.

As it turned out, none of the artifacts on the shipwreck we mapped pointed to the *Guerrero*. In 2015, divers with DWP located a shipwreck off the coast of Key Largo, Florida. Surveying of this site continues, but some think that it could be the *Guerrero*.

OUR HISTORY, OUR STORIES

I have been SCUBA diving now for 10 years and have participated in five YDWP/DWP expeditions. As a Black woman, the work of DWP is important to me. It is valuable for Black people to have a role in uncovering and telling our own history because for so long it has been told by someone else or not at all. To me, this work connects us with where we came from.

With each expedition, we are creating new archaeological advocates to preserve our history and tell these missing stories. I look forward to my next DWP expedition and to continuing our search. □

I SIGNAL TO MY FELLOW DIVERS
WHILE EXAMINING A WRECK SITE. /
CHRIS SEARLES

