



OUTDOOR EDUCATION

SCUBA Therapy

—STEVEN GIDDENS '14

THERE COMES A TIME IN EVERY STERLING student's life when he or she must come to terms with the internship process. As a veteran with 12 years of honorable service to the U.S. Army and the National Guard of Florida and Vermont respectively, I was hoping that I had enough

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leadership development and relevant "real world" experience to be exempted. It was not to be.

I decided to focus on going to Israel with the Global Field Studies program. That's where everything started to come into focus.

We spent long days traveling and talking to students and citizens of Israel about culture, farming in the desert, education, and of course, compulsory service. Students either commit themselves to community service or the Israeli Defense

Force before college. Everyone we talked to loved their experiences, because they felt they served a higher purpose and secured their state. Students felt they had achieved levels of leadership and responsibility that would benefit them in their post-military lives. The average age of Israeli college students is 23 years old. By that time, they have served their communities, their country, had relevant work experience and leadership development, and traveled the world.

I can relate. By this point in my life I had served 12 years and completed three deployments, and I knew what I wanted to study and how; which is what made Sterling College so exciting and interesting to me. My self-designed studies in the Therapeutic Applications of Outdoor Education reflected my desires to teach and counsel and to look at therapy outside of the standard four walls and couches of most therapists' offices. My desires to serve and give back to others who shared in my experiences and whom had given

more, lost more, or sacrificed beyond measure were my mainstays in choosing my path. The only thing I hadn't figured out was an internship.

I had become certified as an open water diver in Kuwait on my 2010 deployment, but had only done the minimum dives. However, Bru Mille '13, also on the Israel trip, was a dive master. On our free day, Bru and I snuck off to Eliat and got in one beautifully majestic dive in the Red Sea! That was all I needed. I was inspired by the calming, muscle relaxing, mind quieting experiences of SCUBA.

The next day, I walked the beaches of Tel Aviv one last time. "Can there possibly be a SCUBA therapy program? No, that's crazy. What about sea therapy? No, too hokey." I wrestled with the idea the entire day on the beach and on my flight home.

It took one Internet search to produce a hit for SCUBA Warriors SCUBA Therapy in Snohomish, WA. SCUBA Warriors is one of two therapy programs run by Janice Buckley and her wonderful organization, Heartbeat Serving Wounded Warriors in Washington state. The more I read on her website, the more I wanted that internship! That was the perfect fit to my experiences, my studies, and the work I want to do when I graduate. Ms. Buckley agreed to host me if I came out with my own gear. I used my first two *ever* student loans to buy SCUBA gear and a cheap SUV. It was worth every penny and every second!

SCUBA Warriors is based on three principles of therapy; the transfer of metaphor, the atmospheric pressure associated with diving, and the cold water associated with diving in Puget Sound. The metaphors are everywhere and one of the more powerful examples was, "Both combat and SCUBA diving are hostile environments where your equipment is designed to save your life, so it must be cared for, inspected, and redundant. You should also *always* have a buddy."

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The atmospheric pressure associated with diving has shown positive results with increased cognitive function of divers who have traumatic brain injuries. There are lots of tests being done in hyperbaric chambers to fully study this phenomenon, but the chamber tests are less effective than the open water research.

The pressure has also been effective in helping shrapnel be naturally and slowly moved away from vital organs so that later surgeries can be more effective in removing dangerous objects within the divers' bodies. Lastly, the cold water cushions the divers and is a weightless environment. Weightless equates to a decrease in pain and an increase in range

of motion. Water, being denser than air, also ensures increased muscle tone and improved fitness. The cold water is also a soothing cold compress on sore and tender muscles and joints. All those I interacted with reported higher levels of energy, happiness, range of motion, stamina, and more while reporting lower levels of fatigue, soreness, and depression.

Many vets don't want to talk, and I am no exception. I don't have to talk while diving and it is something my wife and I can do together, have a great time, and enjoy together without having to say much, but still know every intricate detail of the experience. Not to mention I, and other vets, open up and talk about how cool the dive was. Everyone I worked with, including myself, said that SCUBA diving

allowed us to become less introverted, shy, and actually talk to our spouses and families about more than just diving.

I spent 10 weeks with Heartbeat Serving Wounded Warriors and worked directly with the SCUBA Warrior Program. I logged over 500 hours with Heartbeat and completed 62 dives with the SCUBA Warriors. It is my hope that when I finish my degree at Sterling College, I can return to Washington and work with Heartbeat Serving Wounded Warriors while continuing my education and research of SCUBA therapy, so I can help more veterans and their families connect with nature and themselves. •

Steven Giddens graduates in May of 2014.