

Karen Swisher Story

Born (as a diver) Again! Hallelujah!

On June 13, 2006 my entire life came to sudden halt. While working as an emergency medical technician in eastern Pennsylvania, my partner and I were returning to our station from an ambulance transport when a drunk driver pulled into the path of our ambulance. We collided near the right front panel of the other vehicle and causing us deflect into a telephone pole head on. The impact with the telephone pole pinned me inside of the ambulance.

For several hours I was unconscious and awoke to find I was completely paralyzed from the neck down. This paralysis lasted for a few days. The doctors told me that there was a strong possibility that I might never be able to walk again. Fortunately for me, this was not the case and a couple of weeks later, I walked out of the hospital on my own free will. I had to use a walker and cane however, for several months. Thankfully today I am walking completely on my own, though a bit little slower than I used to.

I have been involved in the field of emergency services since February 1978, both as a volunteer and paid emergency medical technician. Over the span of these thirty-two years I have been involved in many emergency service and non-emergency service related training courses including, but not limited to: wild land fire fighting, infectious control, (of which I am now an instructor), pump operations and fire police, among many others. Beyond my involvement in the fire and EMS side of the emergency services I have been involved with different forms of law enforcement for over 26 years, where I have served as a fire police officer, security officer and auxiliary police officer.

In 1997 I certified as an Open Water Diver, and continued my training through Advanced Open Water Diver, and then on to Search and Recovery Diver. Sadly, all of these activities came to a screeching halt as a result of the life altering injuries I suffered in 2006.

Lying in the hospital and unable to move after the accident, I thought my days of doing the things I loved and enjoyed had ended forever. I have had to endure six major surgeries over the last three years and face a possibility of three or four more surgeries to complete the healing and rehabilitation process.

Among my injuries, I had suffered severely pinched and severed nerves in my right arm and neck during the accident. Due to the severity of the injuries I suffered I currently only have 5% of my total strength and coordination in my right arm and hand, as well as weakness throughout my right side. With all of the damage to the nerves, I thought for sure I would not be able to participate in the emergency services or the sport of scuba diving as I once had.

At the end of 2008 a friend of mine told about a way for me to enjoy diving once again. I was not able to understand how, given I'm not able to carry my own gear or put the majority of the gear on myself. I was put in contact with several training agencies that specialize in adaptive scuba programs, amongst them HSA and IAHD-Americas. After a lot of research and discussions with others, I began to feel that there may be hope after all! I started posting on ScubaBoard, where sharing my experiences and desires to dive again did not go unnoticed, and many have contributed information, postings on my thread, and private messages that help me in my search to find the right organization to work with. One of the names that kept surfacing was Indian Valley

Scuba, and their involvement with the International Association for Handicapped Divers for the Americas (www.iahd-americas.org). I did some more research, talked to others who had worked with IVS and finally made my decision to attempt diving once again, starting with a telephone call to Indian Valley Scuba.

From the onset I knew I had made the right call. I spoke to Dave Valaika, who not only is a PADI Course Director and the owner of Indian Valley Scuba, but also is the Executive Director of IAHD-Americas. We chatted extensively, talking about my injuries, my goals, and what I felt were my limitations regarding diving once again. More importantly, we talked about how IAHD-Americas and the staff at IVS could work with me to get me back into diving again! Not once during my conversations did Mr. Valaika ever mention limitations, compromise or any other terms that suggested I would not be a "real diver" once again.

I made arrangements to visit the Indian Valley Scuba Dive Center, which was about 2 ½ hours south of me in Harleysville, PA. I continued to have doubt that I would be able to dive until the moment I arrived at Indian Valley Scuba. From the minute I walked in the door and met the store manager, Beverly, everyone there made me feel welcome and relaxed. It has been almost five years since I have been able to scuba dive and you can imagine how the excitement and anticipation was building up inside me.

First I sat and talked with Dave, and we got to know each other a bit better. He introduced me to Richie Kessler, one of IVS's IAHD-Americas trained professionals and a PADI instructor. Richie spent almost three hours with me, refreshing my dive knowledge and academics, reviewing gear setups and configurations, and really bringing me back up to speed on so much that I had either forgotten since my incident, or frankly, never learned in my original diver training.

Man was he ever thorough, and I loved it! After that, I headed across the street to the pool, where IAHD-Americas professional and PADI dive instructor Barb White met me for my in-water session. IVS had provided all the gear I would need, at no cost to me at all! Barb and I immediately bonded, and it turns out she is a professional physical therapist, so we had much in common to chat about! She worked with me as I assembled my own gear, checked performance, and then eased it into the pool. They had nice wide stairs which made entering the water a breeze, and the pool is a balmy 85 degrees! Once in the water, I slipped into my BCD for the first time in almost four years! I felt like someone who learned to ride a bike as a child; I really hadn't forgotten, I just needed the means to re-visit this most wonderful part of my life! It was so wonderful to be in scuba gear and in the water again. I felt like part of my life that had been taken away in the accident was given back to me. Barb and I spent over 2 hours in the pool, reviewing skills, working on my buoyancy, playing games, and just totally immersed (pun intended) in the joy of it all. Once we were done, I was already talking about my next visit and planning my diving this coming season with IVS at Dutch Springs! The experience, both in the classroom and pool, gave me the confidence in myself to confidently say 'I am a diver again'.

And as an added benefit, the experience I had at Indian Valley Scuba Center has given me the confidence and motivation to pursue other avenues of my life that, like scuba diving, I felt were forever closed. I have recently regained my emergency medical technician status and now feel that I can return to the full life I had before the accident.

I would like to thank everyone who has helped me to this point, including Dave Valaika, Rich Kessler, Barb White and Bev Loggins from Indian Valley Scuba. Your patience and kindness were so greatly appreciated. Thank you!