



The (Pink) Sky's the Limit

Divers Ramp Up the Effort to Fund Breast Cancer Research

I wrote an article that ran in the April 2016 issue of *California Diving News* titled, “Going Pink in the Deep Blue: Scuba Divers Unite to Fund Breast Cancer Research,” about my experience with breast cancer and the steps I was taking towards starting a unique nonprofit organization. I was diagnosed with breast cancer when I was 33. A bunch of treatments and 12 years later, I decided to find a way to fight this terrible disease through diving. My dream was to create fundraising events that were cleverly disguised as diving, providing a painless way for divers to donate to a charitable organization. After an initial “test” event, it appeared the idea had legs. I impulsively threw myself into creating an organization that would be able to thrive.

This time last year, things were starting to come together for Dive into the Pink. We had filed for 501c3 (tax-exempt) status with the IRS, we had two dive charters scheduled for October, and we had partnered (gulp) with Prawno Apparel to create an amazing women’s t-shirt for an extra fundraising boost. In April 2016, we got some fantastic news – the IRS approved our application to become a tax-exempt nonprofit organization. And that’s where this new story begins.

First and foremost, I have to level with you: I don’t really know what I am doing. I knew even less last year. I was aware that applying for tax-exempt status was a biggie (and that it was better to do it sooner than later), and I figured we needed to make sure that our charters were distinctively fun to ensure that divers were willing to participate more than once or twice, but beyond that? Yeah. Not a clue.

Story and photos by Allison Vitsky Sallmon

Fight. Or Flight?

After I wrote the 2016 article, Mark Young (the owner of this publication as well as the Scuba Show in Long Beach) vowed to try to find some room for a Dive into the Pink booth at the Scuba Show. It would need to be placed with the other nonprofits – established organizations who had been participating at the show for years – the potential issue being that the



The idea was to create fundraising events supporting breast cancer research that are cleverly disguised as diving. So far, it's working.

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space allotted for these booths is limited, and Mark wasn't 100 percent certain he'd be able to cram another booth in until he physically stood in the space and looked at it. In other words, I'd find out whether I had a booth the week of the show. I was grateful, but I wanted to be careful about money since we'd just invested in the Prawno t-shirts, so I put off buying a banner for the booth until the very last minute. This led to a rushed, impulsive, middle-of-the-night banner order only days before the show. The box arrived, and I threw it, unopened, into the car and just hoped I'd need it.

Mark, of course, did find booth space for us, and I was ridiculously excited (Our own booth! Like a real nonprofit!) that I proudly hung the banner and smugly strutted around looking nonprofit-y. That is, I smugly strutted until a dear friend of mine, Eric Eckes, stopped by and asked me why I wanted to support the flight—not the fight—against breast cancer. Was this a drone flight or on a helicopter or airplane or what?

Oops. (Technically that's not the word I said, but we'll go with it.) Fortunately, the nice gentleman at the nearby Diveheart booth had a black Sharpie marker and helped me color in the "L."

Despite the banner snafu, Scuba Show 2016 was amazing. Hundreds of people stopped by to ask about us and about our dive charters, to tell us their cancer stories, and to support our cause by buying Prawno shirts. Both Fourth Element and DUL/OMS approached us with donations for charter participants. We sold out both charters and added a third one, which promptly sold out as well. Then a month later the owners of the *Bilikiki*, a live-aboard dive boat in the Solomon Islands, approached us and offered a trip as a donation.

Turning Pink into Green

That's when I had an idea; the *Bilikiki* trip was too valuable to be a door prize, but why not host an auction? I didn't have time or energy to run a big event, but I figured there might be a way to do an auction online, and I was right. It took a month or two to gather more donations, but we received some amazing items – trips, gear, jewelry, and apparel – and by putting in a little time and effort every day, I soon had everything displayed and described on a low-cost online auction platform. To raise awareness about the auction, I contacted photographers whose work had been personally meaningful to me, and asked them to donate an image that included the color pink. The end result was a beautiful, pink-themed gallery from some of the most fantastic underwater shooters in the world (think Marty Snyderman, Stephen Frink and Michele Hall). The gallery was prominently featured on multiple social media platforms by *Dive Photo Guide* just days before bidding opened.

The online auction was a weeklong event, and we saw a lot of action the first day or so—but then nothing happened for days. I had a monetary goal in mind, and I became concerned we'd fall short. Of course, as anyone who spends time on eBay might have guessed, I was very, very wrong. During the final day of the auction, I noticed prices ticking upward, slowly, then faster and faster. I had set up the platform to end the bidding on a Friday night at 8 pm EST (in retrospect, not a genius move on my part). Although I left my office a bit early so I'd be home for the final two hours of bidding, the traffic was particularly terrible and I only made it home in time to see the last two minutes. When I logged onto the auction site, I screamed so loud that I'm surprised the cops didn't show up on my doorstep. When the auction closed we'd flown right past our fundraising goal by thousands of dollars.

Pink, Pinker, Pinkest

No sooner was the auction over than the 2016 Pink dive charter series began. If there was one thing I learned from the charter we held in 2015, it was that good people are willing to look ridiculous for a good cause. Divers, of course, are inherently good people, so I figured the sky was the limit. To encourage people to be as outrageous as possible, sponsor Scuba Do Rag of-

fered a prize to the 2016 participant who was the pinkest, and the fierce competition that ensued was beyond my wildest imagination. We offered some baseline pink items for divers, of course. The pink tutus from 2015 were replaced by neoprene hoods featuring pink devil horns, frilly pink nudibranchs, and pink princess crowns, which promptly became the most popular gear items on the charters. Temporary "Dive into the

Pink" tattoos were applied to every exposed inch of skin, and temporary pink hair dye was painted into beards and onto heads.

What we didn't anticipate were the pink gear items and props that divers brought along. The first charter was very, very pink. Diver Ronda Allen donned a bright pink wig, diver Tony So had swapped out the black hoses on his regulator for bright pink ones, and diver Janet

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Pinterits wore pink fins. Seeing this, the divers on the second charter doubled down – we had pink door prizes from sponsor San Diego Divers, as well as pink hoods, pink masks, and pink wet suits all over the boat, but the standout was diver Susan Long, who roared up to the boat on a pink Vespa while wearing pink cowboy boots. The third charter, however, made the first two charters look pale by comparison. These participants had had weeks to watch and plan, and it

showed. Ten of the 12 divers showed up in pink clothing. Erika Ladd, representing sponsor Ocean Adventures Dive Company, provided pink gear items to be given away as door prizes. Diver Mark Davidson spent his safety stop wearing a fetching pink poodle skirt. Bethy Driscoll showed up with props, including a pink shark hat and a gigantic pink rubber ducky. And at the end of the charter, diver Ron Watkins (who had worn pink all day, including

a wig, fake mustache, gloves, and mask) provided me with an image in which the water had been color-balanced to become—you guessed it—bright pink.

As 2016 ended, we received one final, hugely generous donation. Professional underwater photographer and Adobe ace Erin Quigley ran an intensive three-day Lightroom seminar and donated all proceeds to us. It was an amazing year, and we were able to send very generous distribution checks to our beneficiaries.



The author with **CDN Senior Editor Marty Snyderman** "pinked it" at the recent Scuba Show event.

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The Pink Horizon

In 2016, our proceeds were split between the Young Survival Coalition (YSC), an organization that provides support for younger women with breast cancer, and Project Pink Tank, a comprehensive survey of breast cancer survivors who dive. Our first order of business in 2017 was to decide where future funds would go. YSC remains one of our beneficiaries, but Project Pink Tank has sunsetted, and we wanted to select a new research-based beneficiary. After looking at a

For more info...

on Dive into the Pink, go to diveintothepink.org or visit facebook.com/diveintothepink.

number of candidate projects with a panel of cancer researchers, we selected one in the laboratory of endocrinologist (and diver) Dr. Theresa Guise at Indiana University. We will be directly supporting a scientific study that evaluates whether certain characteristics of the bone marrow microenvironment can alter/promote the spread of cancer (breast and others) to the bone.

Since 2016 showed us how competitive our divers can get, we've planned a spirited, "we can out-pink you" dueling charter day in May with Oregon-based Dive for a Cure, an event we're hoping will become a friendly annual tradition. We also have two October 2017 charters on the books (one each in San Diego and Los Angeles), and we're planning to add a third charter late in the year if the opportunity arises. Of course, we'll hold our second annual pink auction, and we've already started pulling together some great donations.

Another exciting development is the addition of a tropical trip. We had quite a lot of interest from divers who wanted to participate but who prefer warm water, and we also had several operators who wanted to try running a "pink" trip to give divers a chance to participate in a fundraising event cleverly disguised as an exotic scuba holiday. The first event like this will take place through the sponsorship of Lembah Resort/Critters@Lembah in March of 2018, when we join co-host Larry Tackett to "Turn the Strait Pink." The resort and dive operation will be generously donating a portion of the proceeds to us, and they're also working on a few fabulous door prizes and some great gifts for participants. This event is bound to be a huge success—one diver who is a longtime breast cancer survivor has already messaged me to say that she's booked and has started accumulating pink gear.

Beyond that...who knows? As our friends and supporters in the diving industry have shown us, the sky is truly the limit. And impulsiveness can sometimes be a wonderful thing. 🐟

To read the original article...

Visit <https://cadingnews.com/going-pink-deep-blue-scuba-divers-unite-fund-breast-cancer-research/>

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