

Diving in

Theme parks, sports, the telephone, and hanging out with friends. For any teenage girl, these are the most interesting activities. Hailey Mathis, of Oklahoma, a cheerful, energetic 16 year old, is no exception.

Until about two years ago, Hailey was involved in these and other pursuits, including being a member of her high school cheer-leading squad and hopeful for a spot on the basketball team. An accident, however, changed her life.

When Hailey turned on the TV on the night of May 3, 1999, she heard reports of tornados in the area. As the skies began to darken, she did what she had been taught to protect herself: she jumped into the bathtub. She pulled a mattress

over herself and lay flat in the tub, waiting for the tornado to hit.

After the storm passed, Hailey was found underneath a pile of rubble. She tried to move but found she could not. "I just laid there and waited for someone to come and find me." Hailey had a partial fracture of her C-5 vertebra, which left her with paralysis from the neck down and only minimal movement in her arms.

During the weeks and months after the accident, Hailey had to face a new hurdle, physical therapy, which, she admits, did not appeal much to her. "I didn't really want to get into anything," she says. "I just wanted to stay home and do nothing." Her mother, Karen Mathis, says, "Hailey was very angry during that period." Despite some resistance, Hailey began water therapy at the hospital. Before she knew it, her uncle, John Barnett, was asking her if she wanted to try scuba. "I wasn't sure if I wanted to do that," recalls Hailey, "go all the way under the water. But once I saw what he was planning for me, I realized it probably wasn't that bad."

John Barnett had met Wayne Hasson, a scuba diving enthusiast, in the Caymen Islands some time after Hailey's accident. Hasson told John about SASY, a product he had invented that he thought could help Hailey with her therapy. The SASY (Supplied Air Snorkeling for Youth; or, for adults, SASA, Supplied Air Snorkeling for Adults) is an all-in-one scuba unit. The SASY device is designed for children who are too young for scuba, adults who find traditional snorkel equipment difficult to use, and people with physical disabilities, who cannot otherwise snorkel or scuba. It consists of a vest, which is made to be non-submergible; a scuba tank, which is attached to the back of the vest; and a regulator, the breathing apparatus. With the addition of a dive mask, SASY users can swim on the surface of the water; head submerged, much like a snorkeler would. Because the user is breathing through a regulator—not through a snorkel hose—his or her head can stay underwater typically for up to 45 minutes. Due to the positive-buoyancy properties of the vest, the user cannot submerge. (Official US Coast Guard approval is still pending).

"I've spent much of my life by the sea," says Hasson, describing the inspiration behind the SASY. "When my kids turned 5 and 7, I decided it was time for them to come out and be able to look at the ocean." So he rigged up a makeshift scuba unit. With some



Hailey (right) with her instructor, Lea Ann Hughes, at Oklahoma Scuba, preps for her upcoming dive vacation in the Caymen Islands this June. PHOTO: ALAN HUGHES

refinements, a device now known as the SASY was born.

Lea Ann Hughes, Hailey's scuba instructor recalls that Hailey was very hesitant about the pool and uncertain about the SASY device at first. After learning to trust the device, however, says Hughes, Hailey began to make tremendous strides in her therapy. "She's so comfortable in the water now she can actually just concentrate on her swimming," says Hughes.

"Now I can maneuver much better than when I started," boasts Hailey, "and I've learned how to roll over on my back and pull myself in an upright position. I feel my arms are a lot stronger than they used to be, too." Hailey is

starting to feel like "one of the girls" again as well. "When people around me talk about the sports they're doing, I can talk about my sport."

Hailey's mother Karen has also seen the progress the water has allowed her daughter to achieve. "At first she wasn't sure she wanted to try the pool. But from the minute she got moving around in the water she was all smiles. She really looks forward to her weekly lesson."

Today, SASY and SASA units are available at many dive shops and dive operators across the country, (including many resorts in the Caribbean), which is great news to the nonprofit, education-oriented organization Hasson established called Oceans for Youth Foundation. By virtue of Hasson's donation of the SASY patent to the Foundation, all proceeds of sales of each SASY unit go directly toward carrying out the Foundation's mission: to expose young people to the beauty and splendor of the marine environment and bring awareness of the interconnection of life on land and life under the sea. Though the Foundation was originally set up to benefit able-bodied youth, Hasson's chance introduction to Hailey Mathis through her uncle has encouraged him to reset his goals: "We at Oceans for Youth are very excited about the possibilities of using the SASY/SASA for people with severe disabilities, and, thanks to Hailey, are committed to helping others develop training programs.

On June 7, 2000, the Caymen Islands Department of Tourism is bringing Hailey down to the Islands to have the opportunity to use the SASY device in the open ocean. PADI, the world's largest recreational diving membership organization, will present Hailey with an open-water diving certification using the SASY device, the first diving certification of its kind in the world. Says Jeff Nadler, Vice President, Industry and Government Relations, PADI Americas, "After learning of Hailey's success with the SASY program and the remarkable therapeutic results, we were pleased and decided to issue her the first SASY certification. We hope her courage and enthusiasm will serve as an inspiration to others with disabilities."

Hailey admits to being a little nervous about going into the ocean for the first time since the tornado, but all in all, she is "pretty excited about going there." Hailey's mother Karen plans to get certified alongside her daughter as well.