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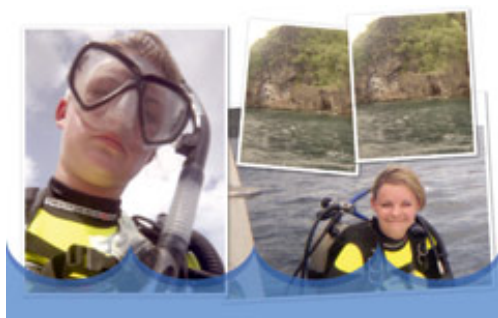
TANGENT: Under the Sea

Baron gains new perspective 100 feet below the surface

By Sarwat S. Ahmad

Herald Correspondent

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As a contributor to environmental service projects undertaken by Odyssey Expeditions North S.E.A. Voyages last summer, Lauren Baron learned about various aspects of marine biology and life under the sea. In addition, however, she also learned more about herself and life. "This experience has made me a stronger person," she said. (Herald Illustration/Adam Nekola; photos provided)

At 16, Lauren Baron gained perspective on life at the bottom of the ocean hundreds of miles away from home.

The Morris Community High School junior spent two weeks last summer diving 100 feet into the Caribbean Sea off the coast of St. Lucia and Martinique as a contributor to environmental service projects undertaken by Odyssey Expeditions North S.E.A. Voyages.

"It was an experience that changed me - seeing different people, different cultures," said Baron, a pretty, soft-spoken girl with an engaging smile. "It was the first time I was out of the country. It was so intense."

For two weeks, the young woman who had been apprehensive about leaving home lived on a catamaran, diving into bat caves and hiking near volcanoes.

Having always been interested in marine biology, for Baron the experience was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to explore the mysteries of the ocean.

"Everything is so different (under the water)," she explained. "There is so much to learn. No one knows that much about what is down there. It is endless."

Having a passion for photography as well, Baron especially appreciated the splendor of the undersea world.

"It was the most beautiful thing I have ever seen - the corals, the colors you've never seen anywhere else. It was amazing!"

Although she has been swimming all her life, Baron was at first intimidated by the idea of going so deep into the water. The risks, which include losing air, having your regulator fill with water, or having a simple panic attack, were daunting.

However, the three to four days of increasingly difficult training at the beginning of the expedition helped her get ready for those deep dives.

By the end of the voyage, Baron was a certified scuba diver and had earned credit in a number of environmental service projects including coral reef fish diversity and population surveys and coral health and disease monitoring surveys. Outside of the water, the participants were given classes on topics as varied as aquatic life, species identification and the effects of litter on the environment.

The experience of "roughing it" on a boat itself was a unique one. Getting stung by jellyfish "about fifty times," laughed Baron, was not pleasant. Furthermore, having limited fresh water onboard, the voyagers had to jump into the ocean in their swimsuits to bathe, shampoo in hand.

Forget about blow-drying and hairstyling, a must in Baron's daily routine back home in Morris.

"I realized that those things are not important," Baron said.

This appreciation of living with only the bare necessities of life was deepened when Baron observed the natives on the islands she visited. Most lived in shacks and fished for their food. Restaurants were a rarity, hitting home with the voyagers who themselves were in search of a meal.

"A lot of people here think that we need all this stuff," Baron explained. "But those people were living off of what they had - which wasn't much. The chickens in their backyards - that is what they were eating."

Seeing the world outside of suburban America has left her wanting for more. She plans on participating in at least one other voyage before hitting college.

Furthermore, Baron's interest in marine biology has expanded beyond mere curiosity.

Her exciting summer adventure has shaped it into a viable career choice. She now plans on applying to Texas Tech University for its marine biology program.

Baron has come away from this journey with more than just direction for the next few years of her life.

"I was afraid of being so far away from home, but this experience has made me a stronger person," she professed.

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