



Photographer: Lonnie Sharp

HSA Japan Launches its “Next Generation”

By Patricia Gatacre, Handicap Scuba Association

Dolphin meets joyful boy, held by Tadashi

It was a stunning week on a far-away island, a smidgen of a jewel between the East China Sea and the vast Pacific Ocean. Despite its disappearing act on most maps, Amami-Oshima was first mentioned in Japanese literature in the seventh century. The tiny, remote island was chosen as the re-birthplace for the Handicapped Scuba Association (HSA) Japan, the newest revival to the HSA's Training Centers.

Last year, HSA founder Jim Gatacre (NAUI 6969) flew from the organization's California headquarters to Amami-Oshima to train three HSA Course Directors (CDs) and supervise the HSA Instructor Training Course (ITC) for four NAUI Instructors taught by these newly credentialed HSA CDs.

This was not the first time Jim had visited this island with its waters of many moods. Twenty-seven years ago he taught an HSA ITC here that marked the beginning of HSA Japan. Now he was back again, and to his delight, Mikio Ota (NAUI 37966) was one of his CD candidates. “HSA Japan was established here in 1990,” said Mikio, “but I never imagined I would meet Jim here again to re-establish HSA Japan!” Mikio, who has a disability of his left arm, has been faithfully training divers with disabilities all these years!

Mikio, owner of Seamaid (dive store) north of Tokyo, sponsored the training, facilities and accommodations. He spent the months ahead planning and coordinating to create a perfect blend of location and atmosphere at the Seisui Villa Dive Resort on Amami-Oshima, a purpose-built dive resort catering to divers with disabilities. The wheelchair accessible villa and pool afford a panoramic view of the Strait of Oshima and hillsides covered with subtropical vegetation. The Strait of Oshima provides safe anchorage for vessels during typhoons.

Before coursework could begin, the necessary teaching materials needed to be translated into Japanese. The nearly 200-page HSA Instructor Manual took many hours for CD candidate Tetsu Nozawa (NAUI 13685) to translate. In the process, he became so immersed in its content and spirit that he told Gatacre, “I want to be part of this philosophy.” Tetsu synthesized the HSA with a perfect word — a philosophy that reaches beyond differences in languages and cultures and unifies the best in all of us.

Each morning's lectures were a challenge for Jim and the candidates: Jim does not speak Japanese, nor did they speak English. The lectures were technical, covering 12 disability types, medical issues, training issues and new certifying methods. Fortunately, Nobuo Shimizu had perfectly translated the HSA ITC presentations, all 440 slides, so Jim could follow the lectures using the English version, with Nobuo at his side to translate questions and comments. Six days of communicating across language and culture brought the nine diving professionals close together in a mutual philosophy of the HSA.

On a cloudless morning, the class met at the Villa's pool and started their confined water exercises. With legs tied and blacked-out masks, they performed HSA's five hours of confined water requirements, including lots of air sharing.

A combination of mild weather, coupled with cooperative, persevering teamwork, allowed the participants to prevail in working hard and learning quickly. The end of each day was celebrated in lively conversation over grand quantities of food in the local town of Setouchi, where traditional Japanese restaurants ranged from casual booths to the traditional ambiance of Kamitaka Restaurant (shoes off, lined up beside the door, and



Osamu conducts mobility impaired skill development for ITC candidates

sitting on the floor). Usually, these nightly excursions ended relatively early because mornings began early, especially the breezy one at Setouchi Harbor where the class readied to board the Villa's accessible dive boat, *Zero Gravity*.

Eagerly and expertly, each candidate performed the HSA open water exercises in the open sea. Eventually, though, a relentless wind chop made the slanting deck and slippery ladders less appealing. It was decided to return to the resort and finish the exercises off the beach. Finally, everyone trooped back to the lecture room to finish the day's work as the skies continued to darken.

With exams completed and only one more evening together, members of HSA Japan settled in for a festive dinner. Seated beside a rustic table that snaked across the Villa's little restaurant, voices mingled. Steam rose from a row of iron woks and wind howled past the windows as the Villa's chef, Kiyoto Sakai, darted about replenishing the woks whenever their contents ran low. In a final farewell Mikio toasted, "Let HSA roots be strong in Japan, and continue to succeed to the next generation."

Mikio is now the president of HSA Japan, and he has lost no time in getting started. In early July, he and several volunteers finished the open water training and certification for Aki Nakaoka, who has a rare progressive muscular disease that creates many disabilities throughout her body — in fact she cannot move most of her body. Mikio said, "Her smile is the nicest smile around."

Aki was working as an airline attendant when at the age of 25 she was diagnosed with distal muscular dystrophy, which causes the muscles to slowly decline. Three years later a wheelchair became necessary for her. Now, she can still speak and eat but can only slightly move her neck and fingertips. She said, "Dreams can

become true when people with disabilities have the bravery to move one step forward and are lucky to meet people who can and will support them."

Mikio's HSA Japan has started the Aso Mana Project so that entire families of those with disabilities can experience playing and learning in the sea together. They experience snorkeling, scuba and dolphin encounters on Okinawa. The first was held in July and a second in August.



New HSA Course Directors and four new HSA Instructors. Rear, from left : HSA Course Directors Tetsu Nozawa, Osamu Takano, Jim Gatacre, Pat Gatacre and Mikio Ota. Kneeling, from left: new HSA Instructors Tadashi Sakai, Fushimi Noriko (Opa), Yuichi Ishiguro the Red and Maruyama Shogo