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Caribbean's Only Black-Owned Dive Shop Celebrates International Women's Dive Day 2024

Cruzan Adventure Divers marks historic milestone in St. Croix, honors female divers, and prepares for grand opening under new ownership in December 2024; celebrates growth from 6 to 25 divers since 2017 and inspires youth involvement in diving

Business / **Published On July 22, 2024 07:40 AM /**

Staff Consortium **July 22, 2024**

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Collage from Cruzan Adventure Divers' International Women's Dive Day 2024 event on Saturday, July 20. Co-owner Willie Ross is pictured below center. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

ST. CROIX — International Women's Dive Day 2024 was celebrated with great enthusiasm on Saturday on St. Croix. The event marked a significant milestone for Cruzan Adventure Divers, formerly known as Adventures in Diving Stx, as they prepare for the grand opening of their dive

shop under new management in December 2024.

The shop officially came under the ownership of four Black partners – Willie Ross, Dwayne Johnson, Leon Cawell, and Jimmy Warren – on June 25, 2024, making it the only Black-owned dive shop in the Caribbean.

The history of International Women’s Dive Day on St. Croix dates back to 2017 when it started with just six women divers. Willie Ross, one of the owners, expressed his excitement about the event and the future of the dive shop. “It is still sinking in. Many years I have been dreaming of this,” Ross said. “I enjoy diving, and I’ve had the pleasure and benefit of diving all over the world in places such as Thailand, Maldives, and Palau. To call St. Croix home and dive here in a business capacity is awesome.” Ross, who has been diving for over 20 years, mostly as a recreational diver, has spent the last five years as an instructor in a professional capacity. He is now moving forward as a dive shop owner with a goal to “get more youth involved in diving, letting them know that anything is possible and always reach for your goal.”

Andrea Hemphill, a lead organizer, shared her journey and motivation behind the event. “It was my seventh-grade science class where I came up against a brick wall as a female and did not get any help,” she said. This experience ignited her journey for women empowerment. When she moved to St. Croix, she found a new passion. “I told Mitch, I have found something I really want to do. So we started with six women on a boat in 2017,” she recalled. The next year, they held a small potluck with the same six women. “The following year, I said, I want to make it bigger. We need to honor these females,” Hemphill continued. “Whether you did it for a significant other, to overcome a fear, or just to try something different, we managed to pull something together.” By then, the event had grown to about 25 women, complete with custom shirts. “These last couple of years, we’ve tried to make it really a big deal and really honor women,” she said, understanding the challenges women face in diving.

Niki Hielema, a participant, highlighted her love for underwater photography. “My reason for diving is that I get to see all of God’s beauty. Taking pictures underwater and the joy it brings seeing God’s creation is wonderful. I have been diving for the past three years and I am an advanced certified diver.”

Her daughter, Amelia Hielema, recently became certified as a junior diver. She shared, “My favorite marine animals to see when diving at the pier include turtles, spotted eagle rays, and octopuses.”

Victoria Congdon, a first-time participant, expressed her excitement. “This is my first year. I am here visiting a friend who retired out here and now has a job as an instructor. So I’m on vacation,” she said. “I am glad to be amongst a huge team of women divers, which is often a predominantly male-dominated field. Three years ago, I received my scientific diving certification and now I do a lot of underwater fieldwork studying seagrasses. That’s where I really learned a lot more of those technical skills of carrying gear,” Congdon added. She is looking forward to camaraderie with her fellow divers and exploring the beauty of the ocean.

Kimberly Jackson, another lead organizer and instructor at Cruzan Adventures Divers, emphasized the unique experience of diving. “I’ve participated in this event before. To be underwater is like being in a different world. It’s serene, calm, and beautiful. It’s just an amazing way to spend part of your day,” Jackson shared. “I believe diving may not be for everyone, but it’s for everyone to try.” Jackson started diving five years ago and quickly fell in love with it. “I began with specialty courses, which made me a better diver, then decided to become a dive master. The following year, I became an instructor.”

