

Dolphin-assisted therapy offers hope to disabled children, parents

June 19 2009, By Frances Robles

A 350-pound dolphin named Matteo tickles a toddler with his snout, sparking a burst of giggles.

The disabled child hitches a ride on Matteo's belly while gleeful parents snap photos. The dolphin expels water through its blowhole and rests its head gently on the girl's shoulder while her parents silently plead for results.

It's a scene Kirsten "Kiki" Kuhnert has watched thousands of times. She used to be one of those moms who prayed for miracles at the side of a dolphin therapy center pool, thinking: Maybe this will make my child talk. Maybe some day he'll walk.

"I have seen kids speak their first word, mothers cry because their autistic son looked at her in the eye or kissed her," Kuhnert said. "Every day a little miracle.

"How big a miracle is in the eye of the beholder."

Kuhnert, a single mom from Key Biscayne, Fla., has dedicated the past 15 years of her life to raising funds for dolphin-assisted therapy, a controversial behavior-modification treatment for severely [disabled children](#). Struck by tragedy as a young mother of a 2-year-old, the Germany native turned her heartbreak into a calling.

Convinced that swimming with the animals paired with intensive speech

or physical therapy helps with autism, Down's syndrome, cerebral palsy and other debilitating ailments, Kuhnert spends her days snapping orders at therapists and trouble-shooting emergencies at a therapy center at the Seaquarium in Willemstad, Curacao. She makes phone call after phone call raising money to get children to treatment, at \$7,000 or more for just two weeks of care.

But, these days, she is hardly ever by the pool, rarely with the children. The memories of the son she lost sting too much.

A MOM'S MISSION

It was June 18, 1994. Kuhnert was the married mother of two kids from an upper-class family in Germany who made her living in sports event marketing.

That June day, the family had gathered at the country club to celebrate her infant daughter Kira's christening, when suddenly they realized they had lost sight of Tim, Kuhnert's 2-year-old.

"We looked for 15 minutes," she remembers. "He was 15 yards away behind a hedge, in an unsecured swimming pool. This is where they found him. He was lifeless."

Tim suffered brain damage that left him in a coma and with cerebral palsy. Kuhnert became obsessed, she says _ the type of mom who would "fly to a rain forest and dance" to make their kids well.

She traveled to hospitals around the globe, fought with neurologists, lost her marriage.

In 1995, Kuhnert flew from Germany to the Keys, where her little boy swam with dolphins at a facility that has since closed. After four days of being put in the water with a dolphin -- following 16 months in a coma -- Tim woke up.

"I was so happy. I thought every kid that has a problem should be able to do this," she said. 'I thought, 'Somebody should set up something like a foundation.'"

That's what Kuhnert did.

"She was so excited about it, she started kind of a crusade to help kids come," said David Nathanson, a South Dade, Fla., psychologist who is considered the founder of dolphin-assisted therapy. "She's very dedicated and passionate. I would call her semi-eccentric -- in a good way."

Nathanson ran a company called Dolphin Human Therapy in a variety of locations from Miami Seaquarium to Key Largo and Mexico from 1995 until 2006. In that time, he said, Kuhnert held raffles, organized dinners and made countless calls to send at least 1,000 children to therapy. She'd get airlines to donate tickets and corporations to write checks.

SOUTH FLORIDA

Kuhnert was so dedicated that 10 years ago she packed up and moved to South Florida, so her son could be closer to the dolphins she credits for bringing him out of a coma.

Tim remained severely disabled for the rest of his life, communicating by the roll of an eye. He died suddenly last year at 17.

"He was the funniest, most charming person in the world," his mother

said. "He was an angel the day he was born."

Despite her loss, Kuhnert continues on her quest to find funding for other families to visit the Curacao center.

Her dedication was to be honored Thursday with an award of excellence by the German American Business Chamber of Florida at the InterContinental Hotel in Miami.

Kuhnert helped create the program at the Curacao Dolphin Therapy & Research Center, an interdisciplinary treatment center on the grounds of the Sea Aquarium in Willemstad.

The owner pays her a consulting fee to supervise speech and physical therapists and she uses the rest of her time to raise money for her charity, Dolphin Aid, which provides grants for people, largely Europeans, to come. "She is an inspiring, very driven individual," said owner Adriaan "Dutch" Schrier. "I am a son of a Presbyterian Dutch farmer -- I don't believe in hocus pocus or so-called miracles. But what I've witnessed here ..."

Among the perceived miracles is the case of Daniuq Kuypers, a 12-year-old who did not speak until after swimming with dolphins in Curacao at the age of 10.

"The only thing I can tell you is that I came here with a daughter who did not speak and flew back to Holland, and she spoke," said Daniuq's father, Hans Kuypers, a Dutch homicide detective. "For 10 years, I had no contact with my daughter. Now she can say why she wants to cry or has pain.

"I can't be sure if it was the dolphin that caused it, and I don't care."

Kuhnert admits she's not exactly a trained expert.

"I didn't know what I was doing. I was just a mom trying to do the right thing," she said. "I am not a nurse nor a therapist. I was just a mom."

The therapy has been the target of criticism largely from animal rights groups, which consider it dangerous to humans and unfair to dolphins.

"Because of the lack of scientific study, there are two vulnerable groups being exploited: dolphins and children and parents seeking a miracle under expensive circumstances," said Courtney Vail, director of the Caribbean program for the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society. "There is such an affinity for these animals, it's easy to believe. But if you are going to claim it has a medical benefit, you have to validate it."

EXPERT VIEW

Janelle Nimer, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Tennessee who researched dolphin therapy for her three-year fellowship in veterinary medicine, says experts are not sure why the therapy shows results, but they believe it could have to do with the sonar the animals emit under water.

She tried it herself in Mexico and felt a "high-like" feeling for two weeks. The research, Nimer said, shows children show improvements compared to traditional therapy alone.

"All animal therapy is controversial, because it hasn't been researched as it should have been," she said. "People are afraid dolphins are being mistreated. You have exotic animals and parents of autistic kids who are willing to try anything."

Those who support the therapy say one only needs to see the benefits to

believe.

"Therapy without the dolphin does not work. The dolphin without the therapy does not work," said Marco Stork, an Amsterdam newspaper ad salesman with two autistic sons. "They work together."

His son Damian, 8, had been in speech therapy for three years, and only started speaking after that work was combined with two weeks of two-hour-a-day swims with dolphins.

"His first word was 'spelen' -- play," said Stork, who speaks Dutch. "Something he could never have said, he said after three days here. Every day we saw a little bit more, a little more."

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