

BLACK SCUBA DIVERS WIN NATIONAL AWARD



Written by JULIANA ACCIOLY



A group of black scuba divers will receive a national award and a planned tour of the White House in Washington, D.C. next week for outstanding volunteer work in documenting historical shipwrecks.

Diving With a Purpose will be honored on July 17 at the 2009 Take Pride in America awards, scheduled to take place at the U.S. Department of the Interior's main building in Washington, D.C.

DWP founder Kenneth Stewart, lead instructor Erik Denson and Dr. Jose Jones, chairman of the National Association of Black Scuba divers (NABS), will receive the award and personal congratulations from U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar at the annual ceremony.

DWP is the first African-American group to win the award. The group, whose members have worked with the National Park Service for the past five years, will be recognized under the public and partnership category for their work in researching and recording the history of shipwrecks found in Biscayne National Park.

Susan Gonshor, chief of interpretation for the National Park Service, said DWP is a "perfect example of how the National Park Service can combine educational and volunteer programs to connect the public to the parks while developing a real sense of stewardship."

Kenneth Stewart, a Southern region representative for NABS in Tennessee, spearheads the group of divers, which meets yearly for two weeklong expeditions at Biscayne National Park. The largest marine park in the national parks system, Biscayne National Park has more than 110 archaeological sites, 41 of which include intact shipwreck sites.

In 2003, after watching a documentary on the sunken slave ship Guerrero – located within park waters – Stewart met with former National Park Service cultural resource specialist Brenda Lanzendorf, who was working by herself on the wrecks. Lanzendorf died in 2008 of cancer.

The Guerrero was a Spanish ship that sank following a chase by a British schooner in 1827. Its cargo included hundreds of trapped Africans who were bound for slave markets. Dozens of the enslaved Africans died in the wreck.

After the 2003 meeting with Lanzendorf, Stewart, a retired copy-service repairman, persuaded a group of four friends to change their notion of scuba diving from a recreational hobby to archaeological adventures. Since then, trained to identify otherwise unrecognizable wreckage, DWP members dive with pencils, rulers, compasses, and water-resistant paper.

They leave in place whatever they find, and they create historical site maps based on the drawings. The group is still looking for the Guerrero.

"Before this project, I gave diving a meaning solely from the exploration of the beauty of the reefs and the process of introducing as many more African Americans to that beauty as possible," said NABS member Erly Thornton III. "...to go down and map a piece of history was something that I never thought I would be able to do."

Since the beginning of the partnership, the park service has launched a "train the trainer" program, through which 62 divers have been certified as vocational archaeological divers and 12 veteran divers as instructors.

This joint effort has "provided both classroom and dive time necessary to convey the underwater technical skills needed to accurately document one wreck site annually, a task that would be impossible without the

help of the DWP," Gonshor noted.

In addition to his underwater study of the past, Stewart also leads the Tennessee Aquatic Project, which uses diving to engage young people in their community.

He has established two annual scholarships in honor of Lazendorf – the Brenda Lazendorf Archaeology Scholarship and the Brenda Lazendorf Open Water Scholarship, which allows one minority youngster to participate in the diving training sessions.

"It is an incredible privilege to honor this outstanding group of award winners," Taking Pride in America acting executive director Lisa Young said. "They each embody the mission of the Take Pride in America program, and are examples to us all of what it means to be good stewards of our public lands. This is one way we can say 'Thank you' for the work they have done."

A national partnership authorized by Congress, Take Pride in America has been acknowledging the work of volunteers since 2003. This year's nominees also include Eli Lilly and Company in the corporation category, and the National Public Lands Day as a non-profit organization.

Federal land managers such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Forest Service also will be awarded for their service at the ceremony.

Stewart, Denson, and Jones will travel with a group of 60 relatives and other Diving With a Purpose members to the event.

"We're proud to help uncover our history," Stewart said. "Many African Americans don't want to deal with the past because it is too painful. But if the story is told, we can make better choices for the future of our community."

Accioly.Juliana@Yahoo.com

For more information about the National Association of Black Scuba Divers, log onto nabsdivers.org.

Photo: Members of the Diving With a Purpose team document shipwrecks at Biscayne National Park.