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Seeking refuge in water as a therapy

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By Anwah Musallam al Aamri -

Tariq Jawad al Khabouri is a man of dreams who struggles to fulfil them. His dream is to see a society where physically and mentally

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challenged people will be considered effective members who can contribute productively in their own capacities. How can this dream be achieved? Tariq is also a man of action who believes in finding new ways to help the differently-abled people living in Oman to be treated respectfully and also make them competent.

Tariq found the answer for this in water. "Yes water," he quipped when asked for clarification. Tariq has sought refuge in water as a therapy for the differently-abled people who are unable to lead a normal life and also get the self-respect that they deserve.

He and his like-minded friends thought of bringing such people together in a swimming pool to shed their fears and thoughts of feeling inferior. It was a spark kindled by his friend Stephanie Trier with an idea of making such people swim. And thus 'Oman Disabled Divers' (ODD) was born. "I wanted to do something for our handicapped friends. ODD is not an organisation, rather it's a team of few friends who have collaborated. We have been given permission by the competent authorities in sports and social development," he explains.

Tariq, the founder member and team coordinator says, "Water is a great healer as it helps the disabled people to feel normal when they do so many activities underwater, which is almost impossible in other situations."

The ODD was able to attract target group from all parts of the Sultanate to enable them to undergo training from professional trainers and to practice scuba diving in the Arabian Sea.

"Establishing an association from scratch without initial assistance from the government requires faith, courage and to believe that will resonate with the society," says Tariq.

He continues, "The first activity for ODD was a Dive Challenge in 2009 held at Oman Dive Centre in Qantab, Muscat."

He says with pride about the positive responses he received from the participants, and "this encouraged us to do more and try to reach more people across the Sultanate. We have organised events in Oman from Khasab to Salalah along with other activities like getting an office space for Autism Society." After the success of this event, there was no looking back for Tariq.

He organised similar events in different cities which were successful in bringing a smile on the swimmers' faces and lighting a ray of hope among their family members. Soon he was able to connect with organisations that were willing to sponsor the events and support his mission.

With this strong support, ODD was able to organise diving events and races for the handicapped under the supervision of a team consisting of diving instructors and physiotherapists. The mission of this association is to dedicate itself to improve the physical and social well-



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being of people with disabilities through an adventurous sport like scuba diving.

Another aim is to develop a network of professional facilities for disabled divers in the Sultanate of Oman.

The ODD launched a diving challenge tour between 2011 and 2017 in different cities of Oman. This was supported by the International Association of Handicapped Divers (IAHD), along with the then Ministry of Sports Affairs, Ministry of Social Development and the National Youth Commission.

“For the first time, in 2012 ODD had 15 disabled Omanis who were prepared for scuba diving at Marina al Rowdah,” Tariq recollects with a sense of contentment.

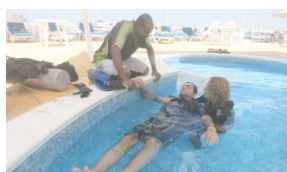
Such activities have led people with physical challenges, low vision, blind and down’s syndrome to be a part of the ODD family over some time.

Tariq appeals to the local swimming experts to come forward to help in his mission. He says, “Omanis are good swimmers and I appeal to the professional swimmers and local trainers to come forward and support our association because it is not easy to organise such activities alone. We have trainers who come from other countries every time we organise activities.” He also requests social welfare groups and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) to “come together under one umbrella and work together to build Oman”. The government has played its role in providing us with the infrastructure, “now it is the duty of the society to come forward and do its bit” he adds. Presently due to the pandemic, “our activities have slowed down” but that doesn’t dampen the spirits of Tariq. When asked about the plans of ODD, he says, “to make sure they (the physically challenged people) get a job.” To achieve this, “we are now in the process of discussing to set up a vocational training centre,” Tariq says with a lot of hope.

A collaborative effort will help ODD to overcome all challenges and help contribute to Oman Vision 2040. It will be an attempt to kindle hope among the differently-abled and feel useful for society. For Tariq, it will give him wings to dream new dreams to bring a smile and confidence.



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