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OPERATION SHARK DIVE: NEW PROGRAM AT POINT DEFIANCE ZOO & AQUARIUM OFFERS UNIQUE THERAPY FOR SOLDIERS COPING WITH THE TRAUMA OF COMBAT

Outreach effort funded by community donors will provide dozens of dives to veterans in coming months

TACOMA, Wash. – Underwater with the sharks, there is only the sound of bubbles escaping air hoses and regulators. The slowing of time. The beauty of the animals swimming so close divers are practically eye-to-eye with the magnificent animals.

And a focus on breathing. In and out. Surrounded by the comfort of water. Diving with the sharks can be both a calming and an exhilarating experience.

And that's exactly the thought behind Operation Shark Dive, a new program that begins Feb. 9 to provide area veterans with another tool to cope with the physical and mental wounds of war. Four soldiers will be in the inaugural dive group that afternoon. They will don watertight dry suits, breathe surface-supplied air and climb into an underwater cage to view the zoo's 16 sharks up close.

Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium is working with officials at Joint Base Lewis-McChord and its Warrior Transition Battalion to provide the dives as a service to the local military community. Operation Shark Dive is underwritten by a grant from the Puget Sound Energy Foundation and other community partners in cooperation with the Point Defiance Zoological Society. Funding is in hand to offer dozens of dives over an extended period of time.

Operation Shark Dive will be worked into the zoo's existing Eye-to-Eye Shark Dive time slots, accommodating up to eight veterans per month at specific times of the year. Since the cost of the dives is paid for through grants, there is no charge to the participants.

"We are honored that we can offer this unique program to the men and women who protect our freedoms every day," said Andrea Smith, President of the Metro Parks Tacoma Board of Commissioners. "The Puget Sound region is fortunate to have these heroes living in our community."

Soldiers who have served in combat zones often return with physical injuries, post-traumatic stress disorder and other issues that can be slow to surface, said Louis McGranaghan, chief physical therapist for JBLM's Warrior Transition Battalion.

"There is an emotional component, and many have problems overcoming fears," McGranaghan said. Reintegrating into everyday life also can be challenging, and many soldiers find being in public or social situations stressful, he added.

The regulation of breathing required in a dive program can be therapeutic for the men and women facing such challenges, McGranaghan said. Operation Shark Dive also provides a completely different social experience. Plus, not everyone can say they've been diving with sharks.

"We are humbled to be part of a program that can help men and women who have given so much to our nation," said Puget Sound Energy Foundation Executive Director Sandra Carson. "It is our pleasure to give back to these soldiers in this small way."

The Norman Archibald Charitable Foundation, Tulalip Tribes, Union Pacific Foundation and three Walmart stores also have provided funding for the program.

Zoo Deputy Director John Houck believes Operation Shark Dive is a wonderful use of the skills and compassion of the zoo's expert dive team.

"When we began our Eye-to-Eye Shark Dive programs in 2013, we wanted to ensure that they were accessible to as many people as possible," Houck said. "Our staff is trained to help people with disabilities and visitors who might be fearful of sharks complete their dive experiences and emerge with both a newfound appreciation for the animals and a feeling of personal accomplishment."

"Operation Shark Dive is a natural next step. And we are pleased that – thanks to our partners – we are now able to offer this program."

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Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, the Northwest's only combined zoo and aquarium, practices and promotes responsible stewardship of the world's resources through education, conservation, research and recreational opportunities. The zoo, a division of Metro Parks Tacoma, is accredited by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums (AZA) and the Alliance of Marine Mammal Parks and Aquariums

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