



Ask Dr. Debbie...

Zale Parry, A pioneer for women divers:

By Debra A. Hill, MD

Our recent successful “Girl’s Gone Diving” dive reminded me of how grateful I am to be able to enjoy the underwater world and that in many ways this is due to some of the amazing women pioneers of diving that came before us.

Last year at DEMA (The annual Dive Equipment and Marketing Association Meeting), I had the honor of interviewing Zale Parry. Although our interview was brief, I discovered an amazing woman. Zale is now in her 70’s and still going strong. We generally know her for her role as the stunt girl in the underwater western, *Sea Hunt*, who doubled for many famous actresses as the damsel in distress. What I hadn’t known until I interviewed her, was that she is a true champion for women accomplishing their dreams in what are often male dominated arenas. She is definitely not about fame but is about letting her little light shine. She was and is, a capable swimmer and diver and saw no need for that not to be appreciated by others in a way that she hoped would inspire others to follow their dreams and live up to their full capabilities. She clearly showed the world that women can be competent divers—especially when she set a women’s depth record on scuba of 209 feet in August 1954.

This accomplishment was not so much about record setting for Zale, it was part of a days work as she was testing the Hope Page non return mouthpiece, a new innovation designed to eliminate flooding of the double hose regulators.

Last year’s October Issue of *Diver* magazine was given out at DEMA and featured several articles on Zale Parry. The cover photo was of Zale when she

was featured on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* wearing a swimsuit and dive gear. She was described as the “Girl Skin Diver”. Zale finds this amusing as it was the very first swimsuit edition. Despite the error in which she was described as the “Girl Skin Diver” and not scuba diver, that issue received a lot of attention. Zale was signing copies of 2005 issues of *Diver* magazine as part of a promotion of her new scholarship program for divers who show an interest in developing themselves in the areas of expertise related to the underwater world. I was delighted that she commented to me, “Maybe you, Dr. Hill, could be a recipient of this award.”

Zale is a fascinating individual. She grew up on and in the water as her family lived by a lake in Wisconsin. As a young teenager she was active as a precision synchronized swimmer and led her high school underwater ballet team. In 1951 she moved to Santa Monica, California. She worked as a stenographer at Douglas Aircraft Company and after hours she taught swimming to polio victims.

She met her husband, Parry Bivens, while working at Douglas. He was a structural engineer who loved diving and he eventually quit his job to go to med school as he had a particular interest in hyperbaric medicine. Zale took up diving because of Bivens. He had been diving – free diving and surface-supplied diving for years, but moved along quickly when Rene Bussoz’ first Aqualungs were becoming available in 1951.

Zale’s first lesson was with this Aqualung in a pool. It was a heavy fire



extinguisher tank with a regulator. Zale asked Bivens if there was anything she should know before she took it down and he replied, "Just don't hold your breath." Zale loved it and began tagging along on Bivens's dives. Most of the girlfriends of Bivens's dive buddies would wait on the beach, but Zale would go along and dive after the guys had finished. She would use whatever air was left in their tanks which often contained 500 psi or less. She never dived with a fresh bottle. She indicated that she probably made the most free ascents in the world and that they were just part of the sport as far as she was concerned. She had no fear and was very comfortable in the water. This later proved to be quite useful to her when she played the underwater damsels in distress roles for TV and film. I was surprised to discover from Zale that she was the one who actually taught Lloyd Bridges to scuba dive. She would also typically work out how a particular underwater scene should take place.

Zale's first husband, Parry Bivens died in 1963, and she is presently married to Bob Neuman. Bob was never a diver, but a commercial pilot who loved motorcycle riding—especially weekend rides on his Harley Davidson with Zale.

Zale now lives in Tillamook, Oregon. Tillamook means "the land of many waters." Zale says that it is known for its trees, cheese and ocean breeze. She is continuing an active life and love of the sea with occasional dives for fun and is continuing to work on a series of books with her long time friend and colleague, Albert Tillman, about the golden years of scuba diving called *Scuba America, the Human History of the Sport of Diving*. It is an extensive collection of over 1,100 recorded interviews, 10,000 photos, and research from over 3,600 books, documents, catalogs and magazines. Volume I was published in 2000. Most recently she completed a coming of age movie about a 14 year old girl who sets out to do something that others tell her can't be done, called Tillamook Treasure.

One of the paragraphs in the Zale Parry article in Diver magazine 01-2205 was particularly poignant and captures an essence of who she is:

"Reflecting on her past Parry says human tendency is to examine the extremes, the highs and lows of a life lived. 'For me the highlights always involve the ocean. Remembering those early days diving California's coastal waters,' she says, 'they seemed so full of

fascinating creatures, memorable for their beauty and in many cases, very considerable size. Over the years millions of others have come to know and love the underwater world. I remain passionate about the sea and I am grateful that it continues to free the spirit and calm my soul."

Zale's life has not been about fame, but about doing what she loves. She did not let the male dominated sport of scuba stop her from pursuing her dreams. Without our knowing it, she was one of a handful of female pioneers in diving that paved the way for us so that we girls can follow in her footsteps. We can be one of the free-spirited sisters of the sea. Like Zale, we can be one of the "Girls Gone Diving" who enter the sea and exit refreshed and rejuvenated, having been bathed by the magic of experiencing the underwater world!

Hey girls—let's go diving! See you all Sunday, November 12th at 9:00am at Montage. Email me by Friday afternoon so that if we need to change the location I will know to contact you.

If you would like to view the interview of Zale, please visit our website, www.divein.tv and click on DEMA on location. The interview will be available on the website on Wednesday, November 8th.

For more info on the Zale Parry Scholarship go to: www.auas-nogi.org/wst_page12.html.

Happy Diving!

Debbie Hill-Titus, MD