

# Diving at a second chance

In an innovative program, five heart recipients celebrate life by plunging underwater.

By LEE HILL KAVANAUGH  
The Kansas City Star

His wet suit is peeled down to his waist, exposing a jagged scar from his neck to mid-stomach.

On his right leg, a tattoo spells out the name Jason. Another, on his left shoulder, is an anatomically correct drawing of a human heart.

Visible signs that Tim Niemienski, 39, has already lived a lifetime.

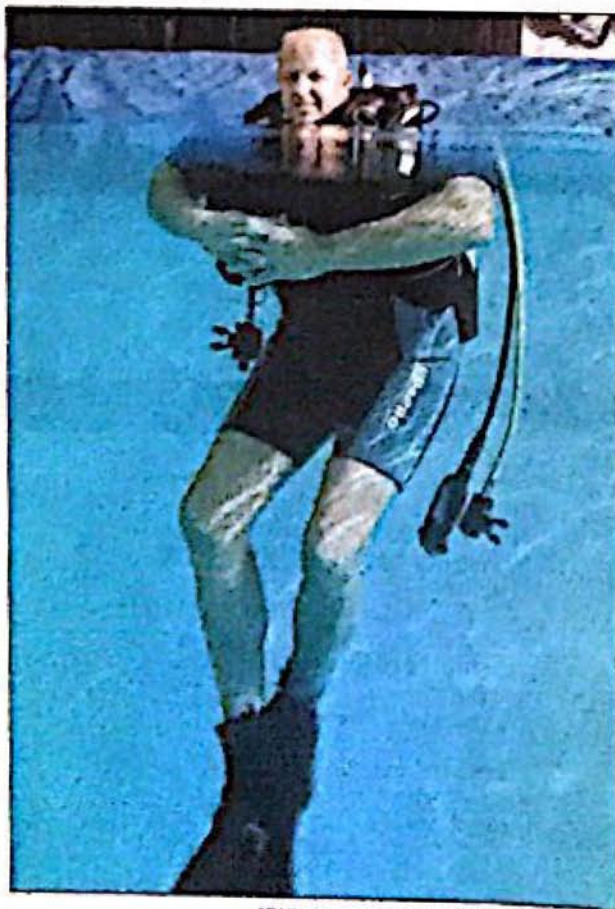
When Niemienski thinks about what Jason's family endured, it nearly breaks his slightly used heart. But the muscle in his chest beats healthy and strong.

Jason gave him this gift, this zest for life, this drive to try all the things he'd dreamed of trying before.

Like scuba diving.

He's not alone in his desire to really live — now that he knows he can. His scuba class, at The Dive Shop in Merriam, may be the first of its kind in the world.

Five heart recipients — includ-



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Mike Sass, scuba instructor and heart transplant recipient, wants others to know the joy of diving.

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ing scuba instructor Mike Sass — are making medical history every time they suit up, area transplant doctors say. They're washing away the stereotype of the "fragile" heart recipient.

Says Sass, 54: "You've got a second chance at life. ... But people think we should be in wheelchairs and sickly."

These divers show they're healthier than many.

There's Ray Gabel, 42, who's had his transplanted heart for 18 years. He plays in racquetball tournaments. He's skydived. He's been an athlete in the Transplant Games, a competition for organ recipients.

Then there's the father/daughter pair, Randy Newton, 48, of Kansas City, and Christina Scholdburg, 29, of Kearney, who both needed new hearts.

Just five human beings in wet suits, masks and fins, learning a new sport and celebrating life because they have received an extraordinary gift.

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The lesson this day is water entries, the kind a diver would make off a boat. To practice, the classmates climb out of the pool, each wearing 45 pounds of gear. Each will take one giant step off the poolside. But first, Sass reminds them to inflate their buoyancy vests and hold their face masks and regulators.

"And look before you leap," he warns.

Niemienski, 6 feet 6 and close to 300 pounds, nearly hits the low ceiling with the top of his air tank.

"Look out for the light!" yells Sass.

"Hey, we've all seen the light," Gabel says.

"Yeah, we've all tried to run away from the light! We're not ready to go yet," says Sass.

Everyone laughs.

And maybe that's the difference between this class and any other. These students joke about death and near-death experiences.

"I want others to know this joy, too. When you go through something like this, you need to give back," Sass says after he tells his students to go to the deep end and stay underwater, holding their breath as long as they can.

They disappear in a flurry of bubbles.

"The whole point on earth is to really live your life, you know? — And that's what we're doing. Living."

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Sass remembers feeling funny in March 2006. Nauseated. It was a little hard to breathe. Just a bit of pain.

Sass, who had never had symptoms of heart disease, was experiencing what would become a massive heart attack.

He and his wife went to the University of Kansas Medical Center to get the pain checked. While there, he almost died.

The left side of his heart was destroyed, and the right side was 97 percent blocked. But when he woke up in intensive care, hooked up to a heart machine, he started asking medical authorities even then: When can I dive again?

Sass has scuba dived most of his adult life. He has trained dolphins and seals and even Himalayan bears for a waterpark in Galveston, Texas.

He has dived in waters so clear, with colors so vibrant, they made him forget he was breathing air from a steel tank. He's taught armies of students how to dive safely, showed them how they could suspend themselves just above brain coral and seaweed, pretending to be part of a school of fish, feeling like an astronaut moving in slow motion.

Diving was his life ...

He still wanted it to be in his life — if he was going to have one.

But no matter how many times he asked the question, he couldn't get an answer. Nurses, technicians, even physicians would just change the subject.

"God, I hated that," Sass remembered. "Even my wife looked away. They knew that no one (with a heart transplant) ever had. And nobody wanted to tell me that I couldn't. ... They weren't sure if I could or couldn't."

On Good Friday 2006, just days after his heart attack, someone died. Someone who had signed a donor card.

Sass was the recipient.

He dreamed that the donor was a young kid, someone who had broken bulls, ridden a motorcycle too fast, taken risks. He'd learn months later that it was a young woman. Named Sue.

"I'm a boy named Sue now," he says with a smile.

# SCUBA: Goal is creating medical protocol for heart recipients to dive

When his friends in the waiting room heard the whapping of the medical helicopter bringing the donor heart to the hospital, they whispered to his wife, Anne, and made her a promise: One year from now, we'll all be on a boat, together. In the Caribbean. Diving.

One year and a week to the date, they were.

But Sass didn't want the diving to stop with him.

Why not teach others who have been given a second chance the wonders of this underwater world? Other heart recipients should be able to enjoy this sport. Why not?

As fate would have it, the doctor who retrieves hearts in Kansas City is a scuba diver. And he

believes that lives should be lived as fully as possible.

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For years, doctors thought that heart recipients couldn't endure the rigors of underwater pressure. No one ever wanted to recommend that a recipient risk trying.

But Sass' enthusiasm moved cardiothoracic surgeon Michael Borkon, the director of cardiovascular surgery at the Mid-America Heart Institute and the former director of cardiac transplants at the institute.

Borkon understood better than most doctors the physics of diving.

"The whole point of a transplant is to take people from their wheelchairs or bedside existence and put them into a normal life.

"And to me, a normal life means one with no limits."

Borkon and Sass set out to create a medical protocol for heart recipients to scuba dive.

The program "is still in its infancy," Borkon said, "but we've never had this kind of opening before. Mike's passion exudes enthusiasm for everyone connected with it."

The men, working informally with Duke University Medical Center and the Divers Alert Network, are hoping to offer the classes nationwide so that all heart recipients who meet the medical qualifications can dive.

In January, medical experts will document these divers' blood pressure rates, oxygen levels and exertion rates to begin the science of proving that it's safe, Borkon said. Once the official medical protocol is in place, "the word will spread," he said. Borkon hopes to have it published in medical and scuba diving journals.

"We want our patients to be active. We want them to be biking, running, hiking, enjoying life with their families. That's what this is all about," he said. "But to the general public this is a hard sell."

Discrimination toward heart recipients is widespread, they say. Employers are fearful of hiring them. Amateur sports teams are afraid to have them play. Some dive operators refuse to take on people who say they've had a heart transplant.

This frustrates heart recipients. Other organ recipients are not seen as "a dead man walking," Gabel says.

"You almost have to prove yourself first when you get this kind of transplant," he says. "But heart transplant recipients don't have to check the little box that asks if you have heart problems. Because we don't have a heart problem. We have great hearts."

Gabel got his new heart 18 years ago, on Valentine's Day.

He says he tells fellow sports competitors that he has had a transplant because the information always brings a gasp. But he waits to tell them until he's tired of hearing all their excuses about not playing well.

"They're shocked. They look at me as if I was going to fall over any second. It happens every single time," he says.

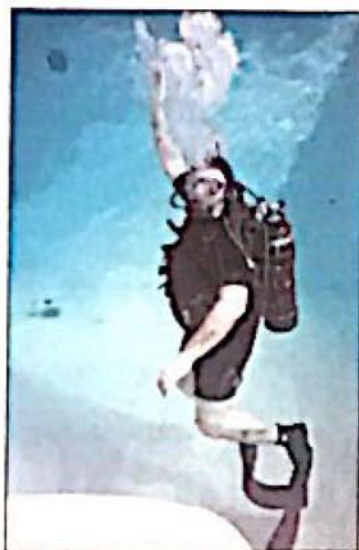
"It does get old."

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The classmates will make a lot of dives in the pool before they go into open water. With practice, they should be ready in early summer, Sass says.

They meet on Mondays and Tuesdays. Last Monday, Niemenski had an announcement.

This is a good day for swimming, he said. A really good day. Today, I'm 24 at heart because



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**Heart recipient Tim Niemenski, 39, of Leavenworth, dived in a pool. With practice, he should be ready for open water in early summer.**

## BECOMING A DONOR

About 160 people in the Midwest are waiting for a heart, the Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network says. Prospective donors should take two simple steps:

1. Talk to your family.
2. Sign the back of your driver's license and join the donor registry through the Midwest Transplant Network Web site at [www.mwtn.org](http://www.mwtn.org).

this would have been Jason's birthday.

The splashing stopped. Regulator valves went quiet.

Happy birthday, the other divers told him.

But each became quiet. The moment lingered a bit longer as the swimmers thought about their donors, about lives that are no more.

And lives being lived.

Like the bubbles from the air tanks, their gratefulness continues through their spouses, children, grandchildren.

All because someone signed a little card that said yes.

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