



photo courtesy of Marc Raspanti



Part of the 'Making it Work' series

When Work-Life Balance Is Underwater

By Chris Mondics

Being underwater is a condition that, at least in the metaphorical sense, is to be avoided, right? Business venture underwater? Let's hope not. Home resale value underwater? Perish the thought. Is the senator's political campaign taking on water? Quick, bolster the ad budget, do a few focus groups and hire new consultants.

So, for the most part, it is thought to be better to be above the surface than below. But there is an exception. For a select group of aquatic adventurers, descending

literally into the watery depths to spend time gazing at exotic marine life is the whole point.

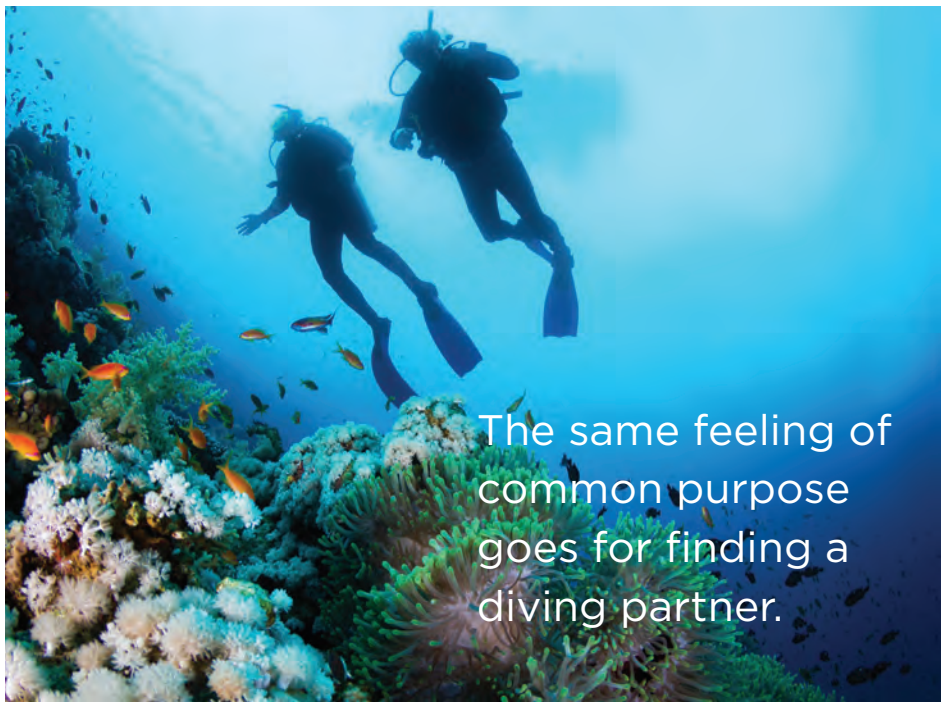
Years ago, the French underwater explorer and environmentalist Jacques Cousteau fired the imaginations of millions with his exploits below the surface as he helmed his ship, the Calypso, across the seas in search of long-hidden wrecks and insights into marine ecology. It was Cousteau who first noticed marine life must have a kind of biological global positioning system that directs aquatic migration. On a hunch, he diverted the Calypso from its route to a Mediterranean island

to see whether a school of dolphins that had been following the boat would stay on course to the island, their feeding ground.

Sure enough, the dolphins parted company with the boat and stayed on course. The supremely rational Cousteau then posited that they must have had their own sonar system directing them to the island.

On a more prosaic level there was *Sea Hunt*, the Lloyd Bridges television series that, during its run from 1958 through 1961, was the most popular series in America.

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On a weekly basis, 40 million Americans tuned in to Bridges' bare-chested exploits portraying a former Navy frogman turned underwater detective alternately chasing down crooks and counterfeiters, aiding underwater scientific research or pursuing sunken treasure among many other, sometimes goofy, plotlines.

Such portrayals of underwater bravado in *Sea Hunt* and the chronicles of Cousteau's adventures stimulated great interest in scuba diving as tens of thousands sought to emulate their exploits and the sport exploded globally. Clubs proliferated, and so did resorts that cater to divers. Years later, one of those clubs is a tightly knit group of white-collar defense lawyers from both ends of the state who have banded together to pursue their passion for underwater discovery.

It was formed by Marc S. Raspanti, a Philadelphia-based partner of Pietragallo Gordon Alfano Bosick & Raspanti LLP, who got into the sport after his wife Wendy recommended he find a new hobby. It so happened that he'd had a particularly frustrating day on the golf course. Since he'd been enthralled with the adventures of Lloyd Bridges as a youth, scuba diving struck a chord.

"I took golf lessons for almost five years, detested the sport, came home one day and threw the golf clubs against the wall,"

Raspanti recalled of his dramatic break with the links.

When Wendy once again suggested he find a hobby, Raspanti decided to stop by a local dive shop, Ultimate Scuba Adventures, in Media, where he lived at the time. He signed up for classes with the owner, Andre Horne, a transplanted South African who showed Raspanti the ropes and helped him get certified.

Initially, Raspanti would dive with others who frequented the shop. But he soon reached out to fellow Philadelphia lawyer Eric W. Sitarchuk, chair of the white-collar defense and corporate investigations practice at Morgan, Lewis & Bockius LLP, forming the nucleus of what would later become known as the Raspanti group. Over time, more divers were added, most of them lawyers in the white-collar defense world, but also a handful of physicians, corporate executives and others.

There's a diversity of opinion among the group as to what holds them together and why they keep coming back — the beautiful, exotic destinations, lovely weather, the sense of adventure at the outset of a dive and the idea that the cares of the world, including the demands of large law firm practice, can be kept at a distance are frequently cited.

But a common theme is the notion that diving is also a bonding experience. Although diving is a safe sport, when you are 30 to 50 feet underwater, it pays to be mindful of the rules and protocols. Things can sometimes go wrong, so group members look out for one another, and that creates a connection.

"If I wander off, someone else in the group inevitably will pull my fin and motion me to get back with the group," Raspanti said. "There is a camaraderie and a uniform feeling that it has to be done the proper way."

The same feeling of common purpose goes for finding a diving partner. Raspanti, whenever he goes on a solo trip, says he never lacks for finding someone else to dive with, an important safety measure. "I've never heard anyone say, 'I don't want to be a buddy,'" he said. "No [experienced] diver wants to be by themselves."

Lawyers often remark that it is nearly impossible to step away from the office. Cellphones and texting mean they are accessible nearly all the time, so creating the necessary separation from the pressures of litigation and the law generally can be tough.

But scuba diving is a way of creating some distance and recharging in the process.

"Scuba diving is risky enough so that you have to be absorbed in it for the sake of your own safety," Sitarchuk said. "But not so risky that you are doing something completely nuts. It requires a focus on your equipment and what you are doing underwater, and, in that way, it clears your head." "I feel at peace underwater," he added. "I am not thinking about work and the daily stresses. You feel like you are on another planet. You are almost flying down there."

Raspanti put it another way. "When your sole purpose during the week is making sure that you don't run out of air, a lot of other things in life become less important."

“No one is texting me. No judges are calling me,” he said.

For all the excitement and beauty that divers experience underwater, they also pay their dues. Certification is a rigorous process requiring hours of classroom work and actual diving experience. Raspanti said he almost gave it up at the outset because training dives took place in a cold, dank Pennsylvania quarry with little underwater visibility. His viewpoint changed a short time later after diving in a tropical setting with clear, warm water and abundant plant and fish life to view.

“There is nothing more peaceful than to be in the Caribbean, 20 feet down, seeing the sun diffuse in the water and thousands of fish,” Raspanti said.

Getting one’s bearing underwater is an ongoing process that goes beyond the initial training. Learning to control buoyancy and thus one’s ability to maneuver under the surface takes time and patience. Details like learning to clear a foggy mask underwater and the proper speed at which to ascend and descend are essential skills that require practice.

But it is the wonders of marine life and the mysteries under the surface that provide motivation and bring the divers back.

“You can really observe nature in its true setting,” said Sitarchuk. “It is a cool thing to see.”

Raspanti waxes poetic when he describes the thrill of investigating an underwater shipwreck, and the seeming magic of being able to float from the bottom to the top of a large ship effortlessly in a way that would, of course, be impossible on dry land. “You see a ship that is 400 feet long and it is the kind of thing where on land you would not be able to go from bottom to top [as you can underwater],” he said.

Off Honduras, divers in the group got to see enormous whale sharks, typically 30



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feet in length. The nonthreatening, herbaceous species of shark frolicked on the surface while the divers watched from below.

Raspanti describes a different shark-observing experience where carnivorous sharks were attracted by a chum ball on the surface, while he and other divers sat on the bottom and watched them feed. The sharks, preoccupied with their watery take-out, posed no threat, Raspanti maintains.

We’ll take his word for that!

In a sign that the group’s cohesion goes beyond the rigors and challenges of scuba diving, not everyone dives.

Meredith Auten, also a white-collar defense lawyer at Morgan Lewis, Philadelphia, has

been traveling with the group to exotic locales for years. She tried scuba diving but didn’t like it — too many diving protocols to focus on — time underwater, air supply, etc. — when, to her way of thinking, a vacation is the time to be under less pressure, not more. Worrying about whether enough time has elapsed following a dive to board an airplane (for safety, blood gases need to normalize) is not something she necessarily wants to add to her to-do list.

That said, she said she is drawn to the group camaraderie, witty conversation and the beauty of the places they visit.

“What I love about this group is that we have a really nice mix of people,” Auten said. “I love to travel, and I love to travel to warm places, and there is nothing better



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Diving is also a bonding experience.

than going with people you enjoy being with.”

Auten and others give high marks to a trip the group made to the Indonesian diving resort Wakatobi several years ago. One of the world’s premier diving destinations, Wakatobi is a tropical paradise on the edge of the south Pacific, an hour and a half flight from Bali. It markets itself as a destination for divers, with an exceedingly remote location and some of the world’s most beautiful, undisturbed underwater reefs. So unique are its reefs and marine life that UNESCO has designated the waters around the resort as a marine biosphere reserve. It is also so remote that the resort boasts there will be no other divers for at least 100 miles, and only its guests can explore the reefs lying just offshore.

For seasoned divers, a pristine setting is the next best thing to Nirvana. In fact, a common conversational theme is the degree to which once unspoiled aquatic places have been slowly degraded by pollution and warming sea temperatures.

There is thus a sometimes wistful, melancholic tone in the way they talk about the reefs they love to explore.

“My goal is to work my way through the major dive sites of the world while they still

exist,” said Efreem Grail, a Pittsburgh-based white-collar defense lawyer, also a member of the diving group.

Grail fears pollution and other environmental assaults are killing off the world’s great diving reefs and he wants to see them before they are gone. “We are doing a great job of destroying these natural wonders through pollution and global warming,” he said. “It is tragic. It is degrading before our eyes.” So, added Grail, “we have this great challenge to do what we can to stop the degrading of these places.”

Indeed, many divers become fervent conservationists. Raspanti says he carries a pair of scissors to cut discarded fishing line away from reefs and to free trapped fish from stray, castaway nets. He’s careful to avoid brushing up against the sensitive coral reefs, for fear of harming them. If handled, coral can easily die and then calcify.

Grail had considered joining the group for years. That so many members were fellow white-collar defense lawyers appealed to him. Yet, the press of running his own firm and his obligations to his family caused him to hold off for a while. When the time finally did become available, he jumped at the chance.

Now, the appeal is obvious.

“There is nothing like leaving Pittsburgh in the second week of February, when gray permeates the city, and a few hours later you step off the plane and you are in paradise and the next morning you are 40 to 80 feet below, viewing sharks and incredible coral with vivid colors. It is all so majestic,” he said. 🌊

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Chris Mondics is a freelance journalist and author based in Philadelphia. In earlier assignments, he was the legal affairs writer for *The Philadelphia Inquirer* from 2007 through 2017 and had been a Washington correspondent for the newspaper for a decade before that. He focuses

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