

*Katie Adamson interviewed her good friend Dr Daryl Wong in our last issue of Dive In, Feb 2015.*

*“Let’s be honest; the man’s a living legend of the spearfishing community and hardly needs an introduction. Dr. Daryl Wong’s almost intrinsic ability as a diver is only exceeded by his expertise in handcrafting state-of-the-art spearguns. From reef to blue water, Pacific to Atlantic, Wong guns are widely considered one of the most accurate, durable and sought-after guns on the market.”*



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# I am Back!

*by Colleen Gallagher*

Living life requires initiative, determination and even a touch of risk. I feel I have been fortunate to have a very rich life. Loving family and friends, a beautiful home I've renovated over the years (it is the home I grew up in, I purchased it from my parents 20 years ago) and a rewarding nursing career for 38 years. In recent years, I created a well-designed non-profit, Diving For A Cause, that joins my passion for spearfishing and helping those in need, together under one umbrella. It sounds so idyllic, I know. However, it was a long hard struggle to arrive at this point in my life. I almost lost it all.

My spearfishing career is a recent avocation—just 10 years. I am certainly not the deepest diver, or have the longest breathhold, but I love being in the ocean, especially in the kelp forests off California.



One of my most memorable moments was the last summer I dove Cortes Banks. It was the El Nino, summer of 2014. I was on an unforgettable trip with Terry Maas, Nick Du Mung and Matt Lum on the Tuna Dreamer.

It was a perfect day with clear blue skies and brilliant sunlight dancing off the calm waters, as if the ocean was calling to us. Terry brought us to our first drop after a very smooth four-hour boat ride. The visibility stretched to 80 feet. In the midst of the bait fish, I could see a large yellowtail, meandering effortlessly without a care with schools of bonitos dashing by.



Additionally, I was awed by schools of barracudas swimming in formation, almost in a perfect figure S, traveling back and forth below me at 40 feet. Their bright yellow tails were brilliantly lit by the sunlight. I watched a lone yellowtail join their formation as if it belonged with them. Then after a few minutes, it would depart, dashing out the other side of the school. Bluefin tuna were definitely my favorite to observe, as they came by in schools of at least 100 small fish weighing roughly 20 to 30 pounds each. They created a wall that in minutes would rhythmically creep from the depths of 80 feet to 20 feet. They first danced by me at 60 feet then they came back around at 40 feet, then finally 20 feet after which they would disappear.



Later, while I was diving with my dive partner Terry Maas, we both noted a glimmer of bright yellowtails right below us. I quickly breathed up and then descended towards a school of six large ones. I lined up on the closest, aimed my 65 inch Daryl Wong custom speargun, and pulled the trigger. The shaft penetrated straight through the upper spine. After a bit of a tough struggle, and working with the float line and buoy, I was able to secure it and bring it up to about 20 feet below me. With very little fight left, it was hardly moving.

Mindful of recent hammerhead activity, I choose to kick back towards the boat allowing the fish to glide just 20 feet below my Rob Allen 10-liter hard float. When I got closer to the back of the *Tuna Dreamer*, a determined sea lion tried to take a bite off my poor defenseless fish. My other buddy, Nick DuMong, made a quick dive and scared the sea lion away from my prized catch. It was left untouched. The yellowtail died quickly and I brought it up on to the back step of the boat unaided and onto the deck where I yelped and smiled, because I knew by its size, that it was a record fish

Fast forward to April 2015, diving in Panama with our DFAC team, on my last successful day of spearfishing before my unfortunate event that totally changed my life. I finally secured my prize tuna on the last day of diving. I was so fortunate. I just happened to be in the right place at the perfect time! Prior to this, I saw many of them in the water, but in most of the instances, they were out of reach.

It was still early morning when we arrived at our first dive spot. I was the first one in the water, which to my surprise was crystal clear, it was just pristine. As I made my descent to 30 feet, I suddenly saw out of the corner of my eye, a bright yellow streak just below me. I made a swift kick downward and looked closer. It was a school of eight yellowfin tuna! I lined up my 65-inch Wong gun on the closest one and pulled the trigger. The shaft penetrated right behind the gills—a perfect shot!

The float line vibrated and shook as the tuna took it down, and I followed it toward the surface. I watched my first, 11-liter, Rob Allen hard float, followed by my second Rob Allen float, chase after the fish and disappear into the blue. The whole event was very frustrating and bewildering. I thought I had lost my gear along with the fish. The worst part was that everything happened without anyone there to witness it. My dive buddy, Terry Maas, was still on the boat, and the other two divers who came with us were on the other side of the boat. I yelled to Terry and the boat captain, asking if they had witnessed my floats take off and vanish. Within minutes, the captain pointed to the right side of the boat and yelled, “There they are!”

I quickly kicked toward the floats bobbing on the surface. The float line was obviously still being pulled, which made the floats move rhythmically with the flow of the fighting tuna. I grabbed the float line, pulled it to the hard float using all my strength, then securely tied it to the float so that the tuna would not be able to swim away again. I continued the struggle and pulled the tuna all the way up to just 20 feet below me.

Terry had put down his camera and grabbed his speargun, in case there was a need for another shot. With a short dive, Terry checked the tuna and my shot. He returned to the surface, gave me a high five, and said, “You did it girl! All on your own. Go pull it up.” There was no need for a second shot. I truly felt that my spearfishing skills had reached a new level and I was so proud!

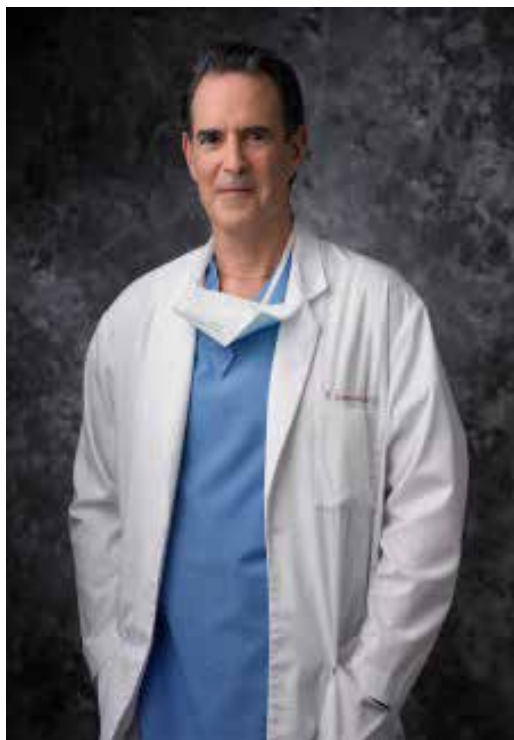
All that changed one night while I was at work. The Intensive Care unit was quiet, just a handful of patients, spread out between our 20 bed ICU. The three nurses on duty that night were a usual distance apart from each other as we cared for our individual patients. I was in charge at the desk. A young patient in our unit, comfortably visiting with his family at the bedside, had a sudden unexpected change in behavior. The family called out for assistance. I ran in to the room to help, and appreciated the patient was acutely agitated, trying to stand, get out of his bed, and exit the room. However, in the process of his unplanned escape, he had pinned his mother’s arm under the side rail of the bed with his left leg. I could appreciate the pain in her voice as she pleaded with me to help free her arm. I yelled for help, but I am not certain if it was heard, or if I had even shouted loud enough. His right leg was still positioned on the bed, but poised and ready to swing out of the bed and stand. I reached towards the railing to release his mother’s arm, offering words of comfort and safety to the young man. Initially he smiled, but as I attempted to free her arm, his right leg abruptly moved over the side rail and now pinned my right arm. He stood. Towering over me with his 6 foot 3 inch frame and 230 pound muscular physique, I felt helpless, like a small mouse caught in a trap. I started to yell for help, but the words never came out of my throat as I suddenly saw this fist barreling down at my head with a forceful blow. I snapped my neck to the right, missing a strike, only to appreciate his growing determination as he brought his arm back, clenched his fist tight, attempting to send another lethal blow to my head. This time I ducked and swerved my neck to the left, only to hear the sound of his fist whizzing by my head, like a golf ball with unbelievable speed and velocity, that narrowly misses your ear from the tee box. I continued to struggle to free my right arm from the tight pressure of the side rail pressing down on it, but to no avail. I looked up, his eyes were focused right on me, they were wide-eyed, panic stricken and his face had a twisted smile as he pulled his arm back again like a rubber band ready to unleash another strike. I ducked again, whipping my head to the right. His mother was screaming in terror.



The nurses, hearing the pleas for help, called security. The staff rushed into the room, the man froze, stumbled backwards, and released his tension and pressure on the side rail that had pinned my arm. It was long enough for me to regain my composure and free my right arm. With the aide of security and additional nursing staff we all successfully secured the situation, or so we thought. However, he managed to pry his right arm free long enough to land a successful blow to my chest, “I got you bitch!” he boasted as I stumbled back. As I regained my composure, everyone quickly subdued the patient and we restored order to the chaos. There was no further harm to anyone. It was a completely unexpected situation. The patient had an acute hallucinatory breakdown. I honestly don’t believe anyone could have foreseen it. In medicine, as we care for those who are ill and suffering, these rare dangerous moments can occur to any one of us. I learned a very powerful lesson that evening. We must all strive to be vigilant and observant, ready to anticipate and manage any violent outburst.

Initially, my neck and shoulder injuries felt as if it was a simple whiplash, a muscular injury. As the weeks passed, it evolved into so much more. I had suffered a cervical neck injury that resulted in severe pain, weakness, numbness and paresthesia of my right arm. There were many days that I couldn’t even use my right arm, or hold a pen to write. Despite many months of conservative treatments, there were no improvements. I was told I may have to consider retiring early from my nursing career, possibly accept never being able to spearfish again, and make life altering plans. I refused to accept that. I knew that just sitting in my garden, forced to retire from all the passions in my life, was not the path I would take. I decided to have surgery. This was no simple surgery, this was a redo cervical C5/6 discectomy and fusion, spinal cord decompression and C6 nerve root decompression. I had a previous fusion C5/6 and C6/7 in 1995. I did my homework, researched physicians and after a thorough search decided on Dr Greenwald.

Dr Ronald S. Greenwald has been in private practice serving northern California’s families as one of the nation’s most highly respected neurosurgeons. In addition to seeing patients at both his Mountain View and Redwood City offices, Dr Greenwald serves as Chief of the Department of Neurosurgery at San Mateo County General Hospital, and as Clinical Assistant Professor at the University of California-San Francisco’s Department of Neurological Surgery.



He is amazing! My hero without a doubt! He spent time in the office explaining the results of the MRI and CT, and then discussing the surgical options. On November 19, 2015, I had my surgery, just as clearly outlined by Dr Greenwald, at Dignity Health Hospital in Redwood City and came out a new woman! No further weakness in my right arm, no numbness or tingling! I am back to normal!

At 6 months after my surgery, regular strengthening workouts have reconditioned my muscles and I was finally back in the ocean, enjoying my passion—spearfishing. Not 100% but close enough. Loading my beautiful Wong speargun, even with the rest tabs, will take a little more muscle building, but I was almost there. However, I get frustrated and discouraged—before my injury, I was able to load and reload the speargun effortlessly. In a strong current, I was proficient in kicking and loading the speargun—that skill will definitely take a lot more time to reestablish. My dives were marginal but effective. I was just at the beginning of regaining my spearfishing skills, but I was being patient. I had not lost my talent to hunt—that is instinctive.

In our recent trip to Panama, my first time since surgery, I was back hunting for the elusive yellowfin tuna. I kept reminding myself that I was so fortunate to be back, living my passion for spearfishing and enjoying being back in the beautiful blue ocean.

My dive buddy, Terry Maas, frequently repeated, “Don’t stress, you have nothing to prove.” He loaded my Wong speargun, helped me situate my float lines and gave me the thumbs up as I was sitting perched on the back of the boat ready for a dive. The captain knew my style well and smiled every time. He was excellent at tracking the birds and dolphins, bringing the divers to the perfect spot, just ahead of the dolphins and often in the thick of a school of tunas. This meant the boat would suddenly accelerate, turning and tracking the tunas, often lurching the divers forward in the process. They were carefully seated on the back of the boat, ready for their approach into the ocean. With my short little legs, every time the boat accelerated forward, I couldn’t reach the back of the swim step with my feet in order to brace myself, almost toppling forward into the water as it lurched forward. I panicked a little, the thought of falling head first, just did not appeal to me at all. The cervical fusion was on my mind, it had just been 6 months. My surgeon was very clear, this one was the last, so I best take good care! I really appreciated that fellow divers sensed my apprehension and held me securely from behind, reassuring me that I would not fall. When the boat came to an abrupt halt, the diver typically made a head first approach into the ocean, speargun ready, right into the potential school of tunas below. I was a little different, as I slipped down onto the swim step and cautiously kicked off right behind my dive partner. It didn’t bother me in the least bit, but to anyone observing, assuming I would perform a little more skillfully, it probably looked a bit awkward.

On this particular dive, at the end of the long day of appreciating everyone secure their prized catch, I hadn’t landed one and I knew it was obvious that I was pouting. I was disappointed in my own performance. I thought I would dive deeper, have better breath holds, but everything was still a struggle and a bit awkward. Suddenly I heard the captain yell “Tuna, Tuna,” I looked and the ocean was just beginning to boil with the frenzy of a bait ball action. Tunas were leaping, birds dove down onto the bait, with dolphins leaping all around the boat. I made my usual drop-off from the back swim step and feverishly kicked toward the bait ball action, separating myself from my dive buddy.

I was so determined to spear a tuna, wasting no time, I made a dive. What I saw was awesome—Tunas, tunas and more tunas, swiftly moving like enormous aggressive rockets, taking any small bite of the bait action. They were drunk with it, just unbelievable to see. I was schooled by them, and despite taking a moment to line up on just one of the many, I knew I was not close enough. Besides, I only had one shot at this. I was not capable of reloading my speargun. I had to make this a perfect shot. I re-surfaced, took a short breath up, and determined this time, made another dive. The tuna were shallow, only at 20 feet, and carelessly streaking by. They had no concerns of who or what was around them, they were just focused on their meal. The difficulty in landing these fast moving targets is aiming your shot in front of their nose so by the time the shaft reaches the target it would land mid body. Tunas while big targets, are incredibly swift and agile. I selected one, lined up a foot in front of the tip of the head, and let loose my spear. I landed a perfect shot, right into the spine, mid body. I watched it fall off its frenzied path with my float line sinking into the abyss below. I followed the float line to the surface, and I could feel the tension in it, but the float did not go upright. I threw my speargun over my shoulder, with the bands tucked under my right arm, and using the rings on the float as a lever, I started to bring up my prized catch. It felt heavy, but it wasn’t fighting. I was concerned that my slip tip may not hold, but I knew the best action was to swiftly pull it up to the surface and I did just that. From the boat, the attention was focused on the other two divers who also nailed tunas. I could hear their yelping and screams of delight. My buoy never pulled down, a signal to the captain and my dive buddy who was in front of me, that I had a big fish on. I could appreciate that they didn’t sense I was in need of any assistance so I screamed loud and clear, “I need a second shot,” I don’t know if I really did, because I could not see where the slip tip was, or if it even deployed completely through the fish, and if it was able to hold securely. It just looked so big hanging just 20 feet below me. My dive buddy Terry, quickly swam over, apologizing profusely for not coming sooner, and expressed that he didn’t realize I had even landed one. Apparently nobody did.





*I actually enjoyed that brief moment, knowing I had secured my prize all by myself, at least up to this point! I felt awesome for a bit of a gimp! Terry placed a second shot, which incidentally fell out as we brought the tuna onto the boat. Apparently my shot was a perfect spine shot and Daryl Wong's slip tip had wedged right into the spine and meat of the tuna and it had to be excavated out. I love your speargun Daryl!*

*What a day! I am on the mend, physically and emotionally, moving forward in my life! I was the fortunate one, it could have been different, and I am very well aware of that. On that one fateful day, I could have lost it all.*

