



**T**ana Carson and Tiffany Zepeda, best friends since age 2, are on a mission: They want to bring the joy of being in the water to children with disabilities. Since both Carson and Zepeda grew up in Key Largo, they know the special pleasure that water activities can bring. So in July, for the first time, with the help of sponsors and volunteers, the friends are organizing iCan Swim: Florida Keys, an adaptive swim summer camp where children and youth with disabilities in the area can gain essential water safety skills and swim instruction in a fun, family-centered and caring program.

"Swimming was always the biggest barrier. It's intimidating for parents of children with disabilities, as they have genuine fears of the risk of drowning," said Carson, who is an assistant professor of occupational therapy at Florida International University and a longtime volunteer at Kids4Kids USA, a nonprofit that promotes adaptive sports for children with special needs. "The idea with this camp is to provide swimming skills, and water safety is the top priority. It's intimidating for families to teach water safety. It requires a special skill. I grew up at my dad's dive shop in Key Largo, experiencing the joy in the water, and I want to provide these opportunities and provide it safely."

Zepeda, a special needs teacher at Key Largo School, said, "The original pull for our work goes back to Tana. Tana and I worked at a camp during college volunteering to support therapists for children with autism. It opened my eyes to service for children with disabilities."

The best friends are both certified by the Red Cross to teach learn-to-swim programs for children with any abilities, but for the iCan Swim: Florida Keys camp, they are collaborating with the iCan Shine organization to bring in two experienced adaptive aquatics instructors to help run the camp. iCan Shine is an international nonprofit that teaches recreational activities for individuals with disabilities.

A grant from the Ocean Reef Community Foundation made the iCan Swim: Florida Keys camp possible, as well as the establishment of the planning committee from host Kids4Kids USA:

Kristin Carson, Kristy Linares, Tania Santiago Perez and Monica Niebles.

Carson and Zepeda are grateful to all their other sponsors, as well: Shell World, Quiescence Diving Services, Price Automotive, Ugly Fish Apparel, Key Breeze Engraving, Cafe Moka, The Catch, Wheaton’s Service Center & Towing and Milestone Shutters and Shades.

Gabrielle Davis, who will be the lead swim instructor at the camp, said, “This program takes a skill that seems impossible and makes it an accomplishment in five short days. Being able to see the progress over the course of the week is simply indescribable. I can honestly say that [teaching swim camp] has been the most rewarding experience of my life.”

The iCan Swim: Florida Keys Adaptive Swim Camp will take place at Founders Park pool and beach in Islamorada, July 19-23, 2021. The camp is geared for children and youths with special needs ages 3 and up, with no upper age limit. Each day of the five-day camp includes a 45- to 60-minute swim and water-safety pool-based lesson as well as beach-based activities to expand on the skills learned in the pool sessions. The cost is \$125 per swimmer. For more information or to register, call Carson at 305-394-1459 or tana.carson@gmail.com.



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**CHARLOTTE TWINE**

Charlotte Twine fled her New York City corporate publishing life and happily moved to the Keys six years ago. She has written for Travel + Leisure, Allure, and Offshore magazines; Elle.com; and the Florida Keys Free Press. She loves her two elderly Pomeranians, writing stories that uplift and inspire, making children laugh, the color pink, tattoos, Johnny Cash, and her husband. Though not necessarily in that order.