

Swimming *with* Sharks

PHIL BESLER '76'S
RETIREMENT TAKES HIM
UNDER THE SEA

By Vicki Mayk



Phil Besler '76 and Carol (Gusgekofski) Besler '76 aboard the Carolann2, the boat Besler uses for assisting with shark research. PHOTO BY STACY PEARSALL/CHARLESTON PHOTOGRAPHY CENTER.

Inset photos, top, shark researcher Samuel Gruber, in white, tags a shark. Bottom, a volunteer offers bait to lure sharks for tagging.

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LESS THAN 50 MILES FROM FLORIDA, THE BLUE WATERS OF THE BIMINI ISLANDS RUN WARM AND CLEAR.

Phil Besler '76 is on his boat, the Carolann²—but this time, he ferries other passengers aboard besides wife Carol (Gusgekofski) Besler '76, for whom the boat is named.

The passengers include marine biology researchers from around the globe, Miami high school students and volunteers. The group is directed by Samuel “Doc” Gruber, head of the Bimini Biological Field station—also known as the Sharklab—a world-famous facility for studying sharks.

While this eclectic group sleeps, volunteers take turns baiting underwater baskets with fish heads and throwing out ground up fish in a process known as chumming. By the time Besler and his shipmates awaken, it's attracted 20 to 30 sharks to the boat. These include 12- to 14-foot tiger sharks and six- to 10-foot lemon sharks. The latter species is the focus of Gruber's research.

“After a couple of people check to make sure there are no aggressive sharks, we get in the water with scuba gear,” Besler says. “They put a food basket about 20 yards from you and you kneel in the sand down there. The sharks get within 18 inches of you before they make a 90-degree turn. You have to be careful you don't make any sharp movements. I've done this about three times; I'll tell you, it really gets the adrenaline pumping.”

Assisting with shark research has become a favorite pastime for Besler, a consultant who retired in 2006 at 52. Besler and his wife divide their time between homes in Long Beach Island, N.J., and Ocean Ridge, Fla. Early retirement became a goal when “I saw a lot of friends die in their 40s and 50s,” Besler says.

Career success has allowed him to pursue interests like scuba diving and shark tagging. Besler, a Trenton, N.J., native, came to Wilkes to play outside linebacker for the Colonels under coach Rollie Schmidt. Graduating with an accounting degree, he was soon hired by the state of New Jersey. “I started out auditing nursing homes and moved on to the state department of health, where I became responsible for hospital rate setting,” he recalls.

Then came a project that changed his career: New Jersey received a grant to pilot a new form of hospital reimbursement for Medicare called diagnosis-related groups, referred to as DRGs in the health-care industry. Developed by two Yale researchers, DRGs were adopted as the national standard under Medicare's prospective payment system in 1983. The new model paid a predetermined, set rate based on the patient's diagnosis. It revolutionized the health-care industry.

Because of his experience, “I became very valuable,” Besler quips. He ran a series of highly successful consulting firms focusing on health care financial management. He remains chairman of the board of Besler Consulting.

He played football until he was 50, when an injury sidelined him. Boating and scuba diving became favorite hobbies. Shark researcher Gruber, now a retired University of Miami professor, spoke at Besler's Florida scuba club in 2007 and asked for volunteers.

Scuba divers usually volunteer to shoot barracuda, which are used as shark bait. Besler also was able to offer boats to Gruber and his team. The Palm Beach area near Besler's Florida home has a large shark concentration because the waters provide lots of food for their courtship behavior.

For the past three years, from January to March, Besler contributed his boat and his time twice a week. He helps to tag the sharks. Each fish receives up to four tags, one of which may be a transmitter that can be tracked by satellite. It's not a simple task.

“One thing that I remember is pulling one of the sharks up so we can attach a monitor,” he recalls. “We're pulling up this 200-pound shark on a line, hauling it up the side of the boat. My forearms were aching: I was surprised it was such hard work.”

Gruber's research focuses on three areas: the role of lemon sharks in the marine ecosystem, changes that occur during its life cycle, and the conservation of the creatures in the marine ecosystem.

Gruber describes Besler as a “businessman Buddha,” a tribute to his prize volunteer's easy-going nature.

“He's a gentle soul, for a hard-nosed businessman,” Gruber says. “He's very down to earth. He's just a very happy person.”

Gruber first used Besler's smaller boat, a 25-foot Mako Walkaround. Later, he convinced him to lend him his 58-foot Sea Ray DB. “I think his wife was a little shocked when she saw what we had loaded on their beautiful yacht,” Gruber chuckles, recalling a stateroom filled with oranges and bananas for the research crew.

Gruber says Besler's support helps stretch his annual research budget of less than \$25,000.

Besler says he benefits as well.

“You get to see a different world when you're under the water. I've gone from being a recreational diver to an advanced diver, and I like being involved with environmental issues.”



Philip Besler

Long Beach Island, N.J., and Ocean Ridge, Fla., B.S.,
Accounting, 1976.

Career: Expert in health-care reimbursement and finance
Notable: Volunteers in shark research with world-famous
marine expert Samuel “Doc” Gruber.

Favorite Wilkes Memories: Football under Coach Rollie
Schmidt and dorm life in Grissom Hall.