

Inquiring minds want to know

Kathy Mallon relies on her experiences to teach science at Peninsula Heritage School

by JOAN ERZER BEHRENS

The adage that “those who can, do; those who can’t, teach” certainly does not apply to Kathy Mallon.

Mallon is a science teacher at Peninsula Heritage School, educated at England’s prestigious Cambridge University, a trained genetic counselor and former co-coordinator of a California genetic screening program, a long-time Peninsula resident, mother of two grown sons, and... what’s this? A technical Dive Master and team member on the recent Andrea Doria expedition that recovered the ship’s prized bell!

Following over a year’s specialized training in deep waters and caves, Mallon and eight other divers set off on June 24 for the Andrea Doria wreck, located 95 miles off the coast of Rhode Island and 250 feet below the ocean’s surface. This dive site is considered among divers to be the most challenging of all shipwreck sites. The Doria, a magnificent Italian ocean liner, sunk to its watery grave in 1956 after a mid-ocean collision with a Swedish vessel.

As Kathy Mallon’s team of three divers descended through the ocean depths to this slowly disintegrating wreck, Mallon was the first to spot the remains of the Doria. She and the other divers each stood on the hull of the ship and viewed the huge breach where one section had ripped apart and fallen forward. She looked in the ship’s portholes and thought of all the people who had looked out of those circular windows during the short, three-year life of the vessel. Because of the depth, Mallon and her fellow divers could only stay 15 minutes on the wreck; at the exact end of that time, they had to begin their ascent.

“Each stage of this type of dive is very technical,” Mallon explains, “and also filled with surprises. As we ascended from that first awesome dive, we encountered a 12-foot blue shark. It swam around us, and it bumped my fins with its nose!”

This trio of divers completed two dives to the Andrea Doria wreck in two days, and they were preparing for a third dive when another set of two divers on their boat, Ernest Rookey and Carl Bayer, made an amazing discovery. As they were exploring the ship’s remains, Bayer spotted a well-known shape and upon examination realized that he had found one of the ship’s bells. Eighteen minutes into a 20-minute dive, all he and Rookey had time to do was quickly dig the bell loose, attach it to an inflatable bag, and send it up to the surface.

The lift bag carrying the 75 pound bell might well have been swept away in the areas ever-changing ocean currents, but fortunately it popped to the surface not far from the dive boat. On the boat, the divers decompressed while others on board, including Mallon, erupted in cheers at the sight of the recovered bell.

“That moment I shall never forget,” recalls Mallon. “The bell is a prize – the heart of the ship.”



Kathy Mallon in her science classes, teaches about different ecosystems.



With a love of deep sea diving Kathy Mallon participated in a dive this summer to the Andrea Doria wreck, located 95 miles off the coast of Rhode Island and 250 feet below the ocean’s surface

This trip was the culmination of a goal that Kathy Mallon set for herself over two years ago. Interestingly, the goal was not to see the wreck of the Andrea Doria, but to train so completely as to have the ability to do the dive. This involved mixed gas use, strength training – divers carry from 175 to 240 pounds of gear on each dive – as well as numerous cave and deep wreck dives. Approximately 1,000 divers have successfully descended to the sunken Andrea Doria, and Mallon is the 44th woman to do so.

“I talk to my science students at Peninsula Heritage School about setting goals,” Mallon relates. “Our Character Qualities program is a major part of our school, and the quality of Perseverance is the one I related to on this trip. I encourage our students to explore and reach their full potential while exploring new environments. Teamwork is also very important to me, and my dive buddies got me safely to the Doria and back. I encourage the children to work together in the lab on many projects, learning how important it is to depend on each other.

“In my science classes, I teach about different ecosystems. The marine environment is one that I find completely fascinating. It’s like exploring outer space, but actually more research has been done in space than right here on earth in our own oceans. Another of our Character Qualities is Respect, and I’ve found that we must certainly respect our environment because much of it is so fragile. On a cave dive, if a diver is not careful, one bump by a swim fin might knock off a stalactite that was thousands of years in the making.”

A visit to one of Mallon’s science classes in her fully equipped lab at Peninsula Heritage School confirms her focus on the exploration of all facets of science. Mallon’s enthusiasm for her subject is infectious, and many students count it as their favorite part of the School’s curriculum. Seated around lab tables and wearing lab coats and goggles when necessary, students from Kindergarten through Fifth Grade

are treated as scientists and engage in hands-on experiments directly related to their classroom science curriculum.

“I love to share my passion of science with the children,” Mallon relates. “They are so interested to learn how things function – they’re like sponges. For example, I have the First Graders pour water into containers, hold ice, observe condensation and evaporation, have them feel and see the properties of each – all as part of their unit on exploring physical phase changes. During one of my units with the Third Graders this past year, we conducted numerous architectural experiments to determine the most resilient structure for bridges. The students constructed model bridges, sharing the results of their research with parents and visitors at Peninsula Heritage’s annual Science/Math/Technology Fair.”

With summer vacation drawing to a close, Kathy Mallon continues to pursue her twin passions of science teaching and deep sea diving. **PEN**