

with: John Gaffney

owner of Round Island Divers

Q: What prompted you to open Round Island Divers?

Gaffney: I started diving in 1978, and by '81, I became an instructor. From '81 to '07, I was an independent instructor. In 2005, of course, Hurricane Katrina came. With a lot of loss of property in my family, I realized that if you don't live your dreams today, tomorrow may be too late. At that point, I began making plans to open this shop. What got me spurred into scuba diving in general was growing up watching shows like "The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau," which opened my eyes to what the ocean is all about.

Q: Describe your customer base.

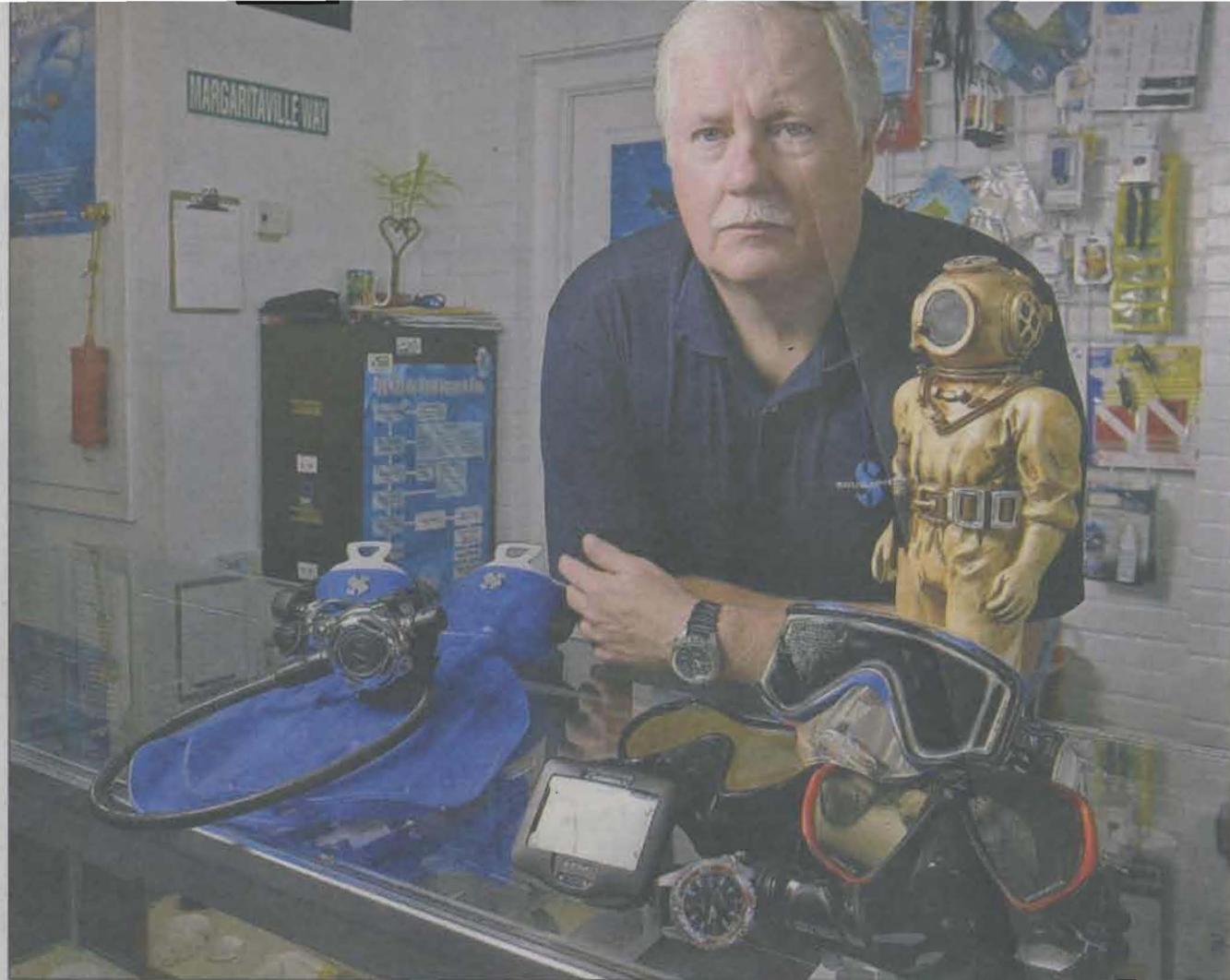
Gaffney: I cater to everyone from the baby boomers down to 10-year-olds. It's not only a single person sport, but it's also a family sport. We have families now who don't just take their kids to the aquarium, they put them inside it. My shop has a lot of customers who come from the local area, that being from about Saraland, up to Hattiesburg and to the Louisiana line. We also get a lot of tourists from the Northern states, where people are taking diving lessons and decide to come here to complete their training. My business is probably 80 percent local and 20 percent tourists.

Q: What effect did the Deepwater Horizon/BP oil spill have on your business?

Gaffney: It impacted us very much. We saw around a 25 percent drop in business that year. But by the next year, it started recovering and we started bouncing back. During that time, we were still able to get people certified. But then we started changing our business model a little and started offering more travel and started completing certifications in freshwater environments, such as DeFuniak Springs and Ponce de Leon, Fla.

Q: How are things now, and what's your industry outlook?

Gaffney: Our tourism segment is on the rise right now. I think tourists realize the Gulf Coast has a lot to offer and that the situation is not as bad as they perceived originally when the oil crisis happened. They are starting to come back



John Gaffney is the owner of Round Island Divers, which caters to scuba divers and is located in downtown Pascagoula. [Gulf Coast Business, Bill Starling]

The skinny on Gaffney

- **Age:** 55
- **Hometown:** Pascagoula
- **First job:** Moss Point police officer for 30 years
- **Best place for a business dinner:** Scranton's
- **If I wasn't doing this, I'd . . .** "like to be a band member with Jimmy Buffett."

into the area, and they're finding that it's economically better than traveling farther distances. We're back into a growth period now, and I think it's going to continue growing. I think that's simply be-

cause people have been hanging onto their money so tight and have been afraid of the economy for so long. You've eventually got to get a little relief and do something to escape. Diving is such a stress-reliever. When you're underwater, you don't hear anything and your mind opens up. It's so relaxing that it gets your mind off your problems.

Q: How large a role does travel play in your business?

Gaffney: I've been organizing trips since before I opened my shop. Travel is a natural part of the business, and you really have to make it available to your customers. When I first opened, we did one trip a year, but we started seeing those trips sell out. Now, it has grown

into two trips a year, and a typical trip will sell out within the first month of announcing it. For example, we took a group of 24 people to the east end of Grand Cayman and stayed at a resort. The package we arranged had condominiums, rental vehicles and all diving excursions planned out. They were basically on auto-pilot when they got there. They truly got a relaxing vacation. This year, we're going to the island of Bonaire, which is famous for shore diving and beautiful coral reefs, in mid-June. In late September, we're doing a dive aboard a sailboat trip with Blackbeard's Cruises in the Bahamas. We will live, sleep and eat on this sailboat.