

CORAL GABLES

SEA STUDIES

THIRD-, FOURTH- AND FIFTH-GRADERS FROM TWO INNER-CITY SCHOOLS LEARNED ABOUT MARINE SCIENCES AND OCEAN LIFE RECENTLY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI'S FIRST OCEAN KIDS DAY

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About 100 children from two Miami inner-city elementary schools spent half a day last weekend getting up close and personal with sea creatures and talking to marine researchers at the University of Miami's first Ocean Kids Day.

The event was organized by UM's Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science, the F.I.N.SEA Foundation and UM student conservation and marine science organizations to teach about the world below the water and inspire ocean conservation, said Kait Birghenthal, a

marine affairs major who co-chaired the event with a Rosenstiel professor.

About a dozen UM students worked on the event — which they hope will be an annual endeavor — for three months, said Birghenthal, 19, the event's head of logistics.

The event hopes to foster confidence and pride and ultimately empower children to become leaders in their communities and affect positive change in the natural world, said Rosenstiel Prof. Jill Richardson, the other co-chairwoman.

Richardson, co-founder and director of the Future Interests in Nature and the



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WATER WEAR: Ananda Lara, 8, walks in scuba fins as Ari Halperin, 21, walks beside her in case she falls last week during the first F.I.N.SEA Foundation Ocean Kids event at the University of Miami. The event aims to teach about the world below the water.

Sea (F.I.N.SEA) Foundation — a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization with a mission to offer at-risk children hands-on, experiential, marine science learning adventures, while simultaneously fostering environmental awareness — said the event also aimed to “create a sense of unity between disparate Miami communities.”

Students from the third through fifth grades at Dunbar Elementary in Overtown and Holmes Elementary in Liberty City spent Saturday morning and afternoon, respectively, on the Coral Gables campus where the college students had set up 10 interactive stations.

They could dissect a squid at one, learn about sharks in another, try on scuba gear — and race with flippers on — at the underwater adventure table, hear about ocean pollution at another station and inspect tiny sea life under microscopes at another.

They also visited a touch tank where they could feel a sea cucumber, baby queen

conchs, sea urchins and a few sea slugs in stages from juveniles to adults. The kids also learned that Rosenstiel is one of very few facilities in the world that raise the slugs, which are often used for nerve research.

At each station, they got goodies to take home — like a mask and snorkel or a magnifying glass.

“That way they can go back and continue to learn,” said Birghenthal, also secretary of the Rho Rho Rho student organization, who was thrilled with the results.

“It was beyond our wildest dreams. We were so happy the way it turned out. Their faces would light up. I had one child come up to me before everything even started, and he said, “I love everything here.”

Nadine Liberty, a fifth-grade science teacher and science coach at Holmes Elementary, said the event is just what the students need to bring their classroom lessons to life.

“It was fantastic,” Liberty

said. “They had a dissection. They talked about ocean pollution. A lot of the benchmarks we were covering in science were covered.”

And the instruction was one-on-one.

“If there were seven of my students at the table, there were seven university students. No student was left waiting for attention,” Liberty said. “Every student had his or her own college student assisting with the dissection. Any question they had, someone was right there for them.”

Holmes is one of the schools that are under pressure to improve or it could possibly be shut down, and the Ocean Kids event, Liberty said, is exactly the kind of program that makes enough of a difference in the students' lives to reflect in their grades.

“The hard part was only choosing 50 students,” she said, adding she hopes UM will let her bring more students next year.



ANATOMY LESSON: Mercedes Jean, 11, pulls the innards of the squid away from the mantle during the event.