Faculty Spotlight: Cristiane Skey
By David Glaser

It’s the dream of so many little girls. That first visit to an aquarium and an encounter with a resident dolphin fires the imagination of what it would be like to be in the pool, swimming alongside the beautiful, fun-loving, and intelligent animals.

It wasn’t any different for Cristiane Skey. As a youngster, she’d visit the aquarium across the street from her grandmother’s house in Santos, Sao Paulo, Brazil, and wonder. But while the idea of dolphin training can be a passing fancy for others, it stuck with Cristiane as she grew in the largest port city in Latin America.

“I was raised in the water and I just knew it was what I wanted to do from that point on. I wanted to train dolphins. That never really changed,” she said.

Following high school, Cris studied bioscience with an emphasis on marine biology at Universidade Santa Cecilia in her hometown. As a student intern, she got her first real hands-on experience in the field researching Spinner dolphins. And while her work was diverse and included developing a manatee watch program, studying pilot whale behavior in the Canary Islands, and serving as an eco-tourism guide, it wasn’t what she had originally set out to do.

The path that eventually led Cris abroad was solidified in 1991, when Brazil made it illegal to keep healthy marine mammals in captivity – a policy she now fully endorses.

“They shouldn’t be in aquariums. They’re just too smart,” she said. “They always trained me as much as I trained them.”

Cris’ first stop outside Brazil was the Bahamas, where she served as a guide and deckhand with a company that provides tourists in-water snorkeling encounters with wild dolphins. In 2003, she relocated to the Fort Lauderdale area to work as a marine biologist on a 104-foot dive vessel. The job combined her scientific skills with a growing interest in teaching. Cris gave presentations on coral reef species and ecology, and taught an underwater ecologist certification course that involved both lectures and field activities.

Eventually, a chance encounter during a conference in Hawaii led her to a position at Sarasota’s Mote Marine Laboratory in 2007, and a dream realized as a trainer of non-releasable dolphins. She also split time working in Mote’s Sea Turtle Hospital.

For the next eight years, much of Cris’ attention was focused on a Pantropical spotted dolphin named Moonshine, who had been discovered stranded in shallow water in 2003 and could not be returned to the wild due to a significant liver condition. The training was purposeful – preparing Moonshine to be comfortable with his medical treatment by conditioning him to allow hands inside his mouth and grasping of his tail to allow for regular blood draws without restraint.

Cris also trained Moonshine to produce specific responses designed to test his hearing and other non-invasive research. And there was plenty of play time.

“For a dolphin like Moonshine or any in an aquarium, the training is really important. They need to be mentally stimulated in order to be healthy,” Cris said. “In the wild, they’re always active, always swimming and they need that. They don’t have to do shows or perform, but the challenges are good for them.”

Against odds, Moonshine thrived in his time at Mote, but eventually succumbed to his illness last February. Cris felt his final heartbeat as she held him in the dolphin in the Canary Islands, and serving as an eco-tourism guide, it wasn’t what she had originally set out to do.

“You’re not supposed to put human characteristics on them, but it’s difficult not to when you know them so well,” she admitted. “My job was to give him a good life and that was very fulfilling.”

The loss of Moonshine also signaled an opportunity for change. The time demands of Cris’ job were becoming more difficult to juggle with the needs of her four-year-old son. While at Mote, Cris completed a master’s degree in conservation education from George Mason University, and she had always enjoyed working with student interns.

When an opportunity came this school year to fill-in at Saint Stephen’s for marine science teacher Allison Misiewicz during her maternity leave, Cris leapt at the chance. She has since taken on a more permanent role teaching the program’s Marine Science I classes.

“I get to talk about the things I love and try to get kids excited about Marine Science so they’ll go on and take the advanced classes,” Cris said. “I happened to be in the right place at the right time and I couldn’t have ended up in a better place than Saint Stephen’s.”