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'I thought Port needed a mermaid, and I wanted to do something to help promote the city.'

With the Port Washington lighthouse in the background, Mermaid Aiyana sunned herself on the shore. *Photo by Sam Arendt*Jackie Killey is working her tail off this time of year, which is to be expected when you're the only mermaid in town.

"I thought Port needed a mermaid, and I wanted to do something to help promote the city," the 22-year-old Port resident said.

Sporting a long, iridescent tail, Killey can be seen frolicking in the waters of the Port Washington marina during festivals. She's usually at events like Pirate Festival and Maritime Heritage Festival promoting Divers' Delight scuba charter business, but she has also made it her mission to introduce as many people as possible to the closest thing Lake Michigan has to a mermaid.

"Rather than just doing something to make money, I wanted to find something that was fun, something that makes kids happy and adds to
what Port has to offer," she said.

Ask Killey how long she's been a mermaid and she's quick to play the part.

"Since birth, of course," she said.

The truth is, Killey created Mermaid Aiyana, which is what she calls herself when in tail, about three years ago on a whim. All it took was some neoprene wet suit material, a diver's fin and some spray paint, not to mention a bit of chutzpa.

"I realize being a mermaid is a pretty nerdy, dorky thing to be, but it's a lot of fun," she said.

Making an attractive tail was one thing. Swimming in it was quite another. That's right, no matter how cold the lake water, Mermaid Aiyana takes the plunge.

"If you're sitting around on land, then you're just a girl with a tail," she said.

"I'm a strong swimmer, but the first time I went in the water with my tail I was terrified. I just kind of flailed around until I got the hang of it."

Killey said she always has someone watching her in the water, a job that usually falls to her boyfriend, who also helps with land transportation.

"You can slip the tail off easy enough, but I don't want to ruin the illusion for children, so I need someone to carry me on land or help me waddle around," she said.

Killey also learned that while she may be one of the only freshwater mermaids around, there are plenty of similar fish in the ocean.

"I started out being a mermaid just for fun, but then I discovered there's a whole mermaid culture out there and lot of people are really into this," she said. "There's even a world mermaid competition that's being held in Las Vegas this year."

Now in her fourth summer as a mermaid, Killey is taking her job a little more seriously by upgrading her tail and trying to book more appearances.

"You can make your own tail for about $20 in 10 minutes with a can of spray paint, which is what I did for my first two," she said. "But last year, I found this place in Florida that makes tails. It was a little more expensive, but it looks great."

The new tail cost $750 and weigh 20 pounds.

"It's pretty high-maintenance, so I have to be careful with it on land," she said.

Killey said the real joy of being a mermaid is piquing the curiosity of children, some of whom are young enough to still believe in mythical sea creatures like the beautiful and beloved young mermaid in Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale "The Little Mermaid," who was given the name Ariel in the animated Disney movie by the same name.

"One little girl came up to me at Pirate Fest one year and asked me to bend down so she could whisper in my ear," Killey said. "She asked,
'Do you ever find anything beautiful at the bottom of the ocean?'

"It made me cry to think some children still believe in that little bit of magic."

But being a mermaid is not all about smiles and hugs.

"Some kids are absolutely terrified when they first see me, and there are others who don't know what to make of me," she said.

Maybe the children who are scared of Mermaid Aiyana are well versed in mermaid lore.

"No matter what you do in life, you always should do your research," Killey said. "So I did, and I learned that the mermaids of lore are really
awful creatures who drown young children and drag sailors to the bottom of the ocean.

"Thank goodness for the "The Little Mermaid," she said, referring to the kinder, gentler mermaid Ariel.

Killey noted that the nice mermaid image suffered another blow with the recent release of the latest "Pirates of the Caribbean" movie in which
innocent looking mermaids become hissing, fanged monsters who drag sailors into the abyss.

"I did a girl's birthday part the day after the movie came out and as soon as the girls saw me, they just kind of stared, probably wondering, 'Is she here to eat us or play with us?'" she said.

For the most part, however, Killey is able to win the hearts of children, who are in the habit of dousing her with water when they see her on land.

"They're afraid I'm going to dry out," she said. "It's sweet, but one time a girl poured apple juice all over me. That wasn't so nice because I was quickly swarmed by bees."

You get the impression Killey is sincere about wanting to please children with a bit of fairy-tale fantasy because being a mermaid isn't exactly a high-paying job.

In exchange for her promotional work, Killey receives free scuba lessons from Divers' Delight, said the mermaid who can swim but can't dive.

"Learning to dive in Lake Michigan is pretty intimidating," she said.

Having put in her time as rookie mermaid, Killey is now ready to commit to the job.

"I'm at the point now where I'm trying to get my fin off the ground and really promote myself," she said. "I'd like to do more birthday parties and
anything local to help Port. This town deserves something a little different and a little unique."

Killey, a 2007 graduate of Port Washington High School, has called Port home since she and her family moved here from Menomonee Falls in 1997. Her father's employer transferred him to its facility in Kohler and the family needed to find a city farther north to call home.

"It was so fortunate we chose Port because I love everything about this city," she said. "It's perfect, especially for a mermaid."