



The Little Mermaid Biologist

UCF student becomes an international mermaid while studying marine biology.

BY KAYLA GAYLE

Antonia Ferguson is a 19-year-old international student from the Bahamas majoring in marine and aquatic biology. Uniquely, she is also a self-trained mermaid planning on receiving her Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) Mermaid Course certificate by next summer.

In high school, Ferguson was introduced to marine biology and while researching the field she was exposed to the existence of professional mermaids.

"I got into being a mermaid because I wanted a fun way to teach children about marine biology. I felt like it would be better if there's a mermaid talking to them saying 'protect my home, pick up plastic bottles from my home' and 'protect the sea creatures in my home and also protect me' than if I were to stand up there with two legs and say 'the fish need saving' and 'don't put plastic in the ocean,'" Ferguson said. "I feel like they have more of a connection to the ocean with me being there in their face. And they really do believe that I'm real so they definitely want to consider the ocean just to make sure I'm safe since we become friends after our interaction."

Ferguson, or "Mermaid Tonia," has worked for the Bahamas Reef Environment Educational Foundation (BREEF) where she was able to participate in research trips to study marine life. She also taught Bahamian children about the importance of ocean

conservation at camps in Eleuthera and Nassau.

This past summer, Ferguson was able to connect with children through her work at the Atlantis Paradise Island Resort near Nassau. As she swam and played with the children, she spread the message of "don't let anyone stop your shine." She also inspired them by just being a Black woman in her position.

"You don't really have that representation of Black mermaids. And even in the hotel, I've had it said to me 'We're so happy to have more diversity in mermaids,'" Ferguson said. "So they were more than happy to have me there as the Black mermaid so the children could see they can be a mermaid, too, and that they are also represented... The children were so happy to see a Black mermaid."

Ferguson also shared her excitement for the upcoming "The Little Mermaid" live-action film adaptation starring Halle Bailey as Princess Ariel, noting the effect it may have on Black children. "They'll see someone doing things they would want to do and instead of them growing up and saying they were inspired to be a mermaid or care about the ocean by Ariel, as in the white Ariel, when it pops up in their head they could say 'oh it was the Black Ariel' and if she could do it they could do it too," Ferguson said.

Antonia "Mermaid Tonia" Ferguson at the Reflecting Pond in her mermaid costume featuring her first mermaid bra gifted by Linzi Knowles-Belton, Bahama's first professional mermaid.

She hopes that through her role as a mermaid, she'll be able to impact as many children as possible by increasing their understanding of marine biology, ocean conservation and the significance of the ocean.

"Some of my family are like 'I hope you're happy with yourself lying to children I never really thought of it as lying to children but honestly, I am lying to children,'" Ferguson said. "I just wanted them to have that good part of their childhood, where they still believe in the magic and things like that. And when they get older, they could start to say 'Okay, she wasn't actually real but at least I got that experience with meeting a 'real life' mermaid.'"

LEFT: PHOTO BY KAYLA GAYLE RIGHT: PHOTO COURTESY OF INFLUENCERS