

Sylvester J. Muller (NSS 63952RE), Florida

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My name is Sylvester J. Muller, but most people are familiar with my nickname, "TJ". In 2009, I began cave diving after delving further into more technical open water diving; a deep water diving class specifically piqued my interest, and so I then took a cavern class. It was a natural extension for me, and my first "real" cave dive was at Ginnie Springs. Years later, I've dived a number of other cave systems, both fresh and saltwater. I have been in underwater cave systems that only a hand-full of people have been in - with my favorite being the "Mt Everest" of Florida cave diving, Eagles Nest.

I am currently the vice chairman of the NSS's largest section: the cave diving section (NSS-CDS). It has been my pleasure to serve the cave diving community on the board of this organization for 6 years. During this time I have helped elevate the organization in both members and solvency; I've accomplished this by revamping our social media presence to be relevant to new prospective members, and by spending a significant amount of time raising funds and acquiring sponsors. My role was pivotal in keeping Eagles Nest open to cave divers after several fatalities, and I helped structure the management plan that allows us to keep it this way. Prior to holding the vice chairman position, I was the Secretary of the NSS-CDS as well as having a role on the nominations committee and the workshop committee, which I currently oversee, in addition to my role as liaison between the NSS and the NSS-CDS.

In addition, I undertook the only successful litigation against a municipality on behalf of the NSS when I sued the city of Alachua after Walmart attempted to build a Super Center (with gas station) on top of a sensitive aquifer and a cave that feeds directly to the NSS's Mill Creek preserve. Although the city was backed by a large, multinational corporation and developers with deep pockets, I helped organize community groups, the Sierra Club, the NSS-CDS, and the NSS in order to fight the potential environmental disaster. Even after being completely closed out of negotiations, we managed to mount a serious case that forced major, permanent covenants on the land; as a result of this hard work, there will be no gas station over the aquifer. After the ruling set the precedent, the adjacent land holdings around the preserve are being set aside as well. The Audubon Society, Suwannee River Water Management District and the State of Florida Trust for public lands have also stepped up with grants and conservation easements to preserve a place we always knew was worth protecting. It is efforts like this that show the importance of the NSS and its mission.

One of my goals is to help improve the relationship between the NSS and the CDS by involving CDS members in NSS events and encouraging NSS members to attend CDS events. Additionally, due to my firsthand experience on a wrongful death case, I plan to protect the organization by structuring our preserves in a way that prevents similar lawsuits in the future — all while retaining the access of our members to the caves these preserves contain. I also want to expand our social media presence across several platforms in order to maintain and grow our membership base.

Thanks for your consideration.