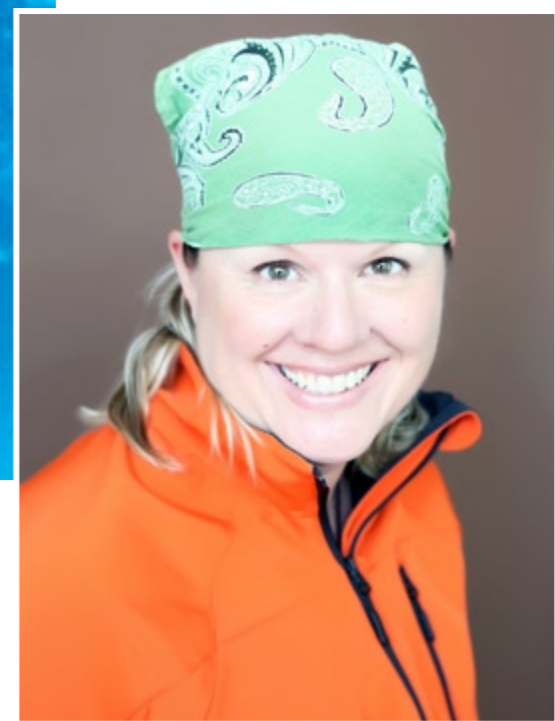




Text by Bonnie Harris McKenna  
Photos courtesy of Jill Heinerth

**Jill Heinerth, whose first job was a newspaper route in her home town of Toronto, Canada, is today a pioneer technical diver and instructor, a renowned explorer of underwater caves who owns a record for the deepest and longest cave dive, and a record for the longest dive into an Antarctic iceberg. She is also a respected filmmaker, author and photographer. She has been honored by the diving community by being an inaugural inductee into the Women Divers Hall of Fame, and this year, she will receive the Nogi award in recognition of her continued work in the dive industry.**

# Jill Heinerth

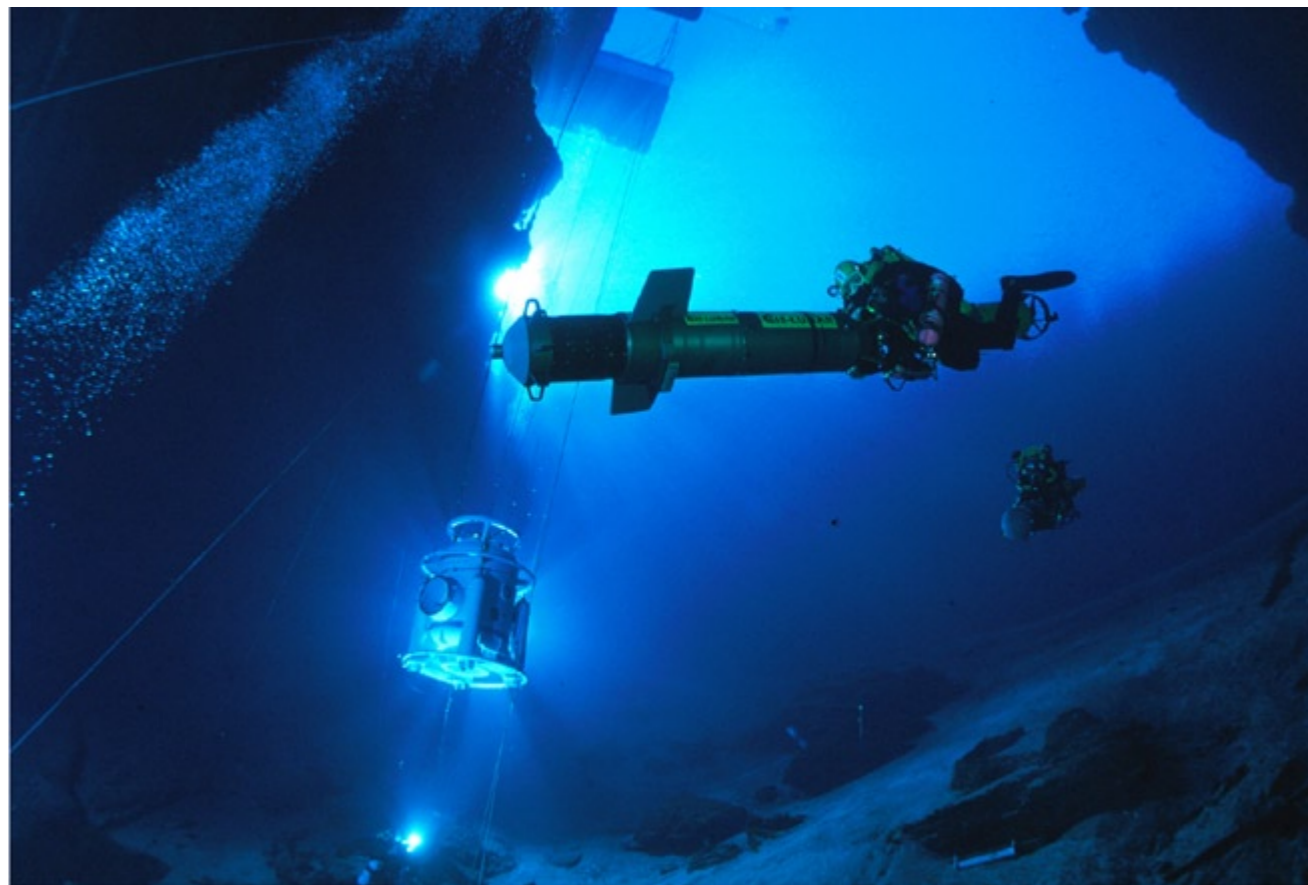


Heinerth currently resides in High Springs, Florida, with her husband, Robert McCellan, who is not only her life partner but her business partner, too. He has a background in concert promotion, as a studio engineer and a Navy SeaBee com-

bat photojournalist—all critical tools at Heinerth Productions.  
Heinerth earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Visual Communications Design from York University. “It is a highly specialized and competitive four-year degree

that puts out creative professionals. My advanced education is in curiosity,” she commented.  
*BHM: When and where did you become interested in SCUBA diving?*

JH: I was a volunteer swim instructor and lifeguard at a local swimming pool when, at age 16, I got a chance to try scuba. I was hooked. I finally got certified in university. I had been wanting to do it all my life, but I had to earn the cash to take the



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we can get with our antenna.

*BHM: What are the greatest challenges you have faced in your career?*

JH: I've faced numerous challenges being a woman in a man's world. Whether it is in the field of technical diving or filmmaking, that said, the older I get, the more our world seems to embrace talent in either gender.

*BHM: What are the most important*

*attributes of a person who wants to get involved in the work you do?*

JH: I think humility is the key... perhaps in all aspects of life. Tenacity is critical, too. If you have a dream, you can accomplish anything you set your sights on, but it will take tenacity and really hard work to succeed.

*BHM: How do you prepare for the demands of tech-diving?*

JH: In diving, fitness is ideally important and that includes physical and mental fitness. I manage to put in hundreds of dives every year, but I still focus on rehearsal and currency. I have a lot of diving toys and have to remain fresh and current before taking those toys out on a job. Then, Practice, Practice, Practice and always accept new learning opportunities.

*BHM: What kind of person do you want diving on the same team as you?*

JH: Open minded. Comfortable in their own skin. Versatile, creative thinkers and hard workers.

*BHM: If you could switch professions, what would it be?*

JH: That's tough, because I am living my dream.

*BHM: What do you do when you are not working?*

JH: My husband and I have a really weird yard. We grow as much of our food as possible and built an outdoor shower, a yurt and a geodesic greenhouse. We love working on our mini-farm and yard art. We are also avid cyclists and paddlers.

*BHM: What is the one thing about you that your colleagues may not know?*

JH: That one thing is actually two. I am a painter and love to watch "Dancing with the Stars". My husband loves watching, too. We watch very little TV; we don't even have cable or satellite; we have to rely on what



a dive instructor, guide and managing the marketing for the resort. In terms of photography, I think I have always been the person to document life and share it.

classes. My early years in diving were in Tobermory, Canada, in the wreck capital of the Great Lakes.

*BHM: Did you have a hero when you were growing up that influenced your desire to dive and explore?*

JH: This may sound obvious, but I loved Jacques Cousteau's Undersea Adventures. It was on on Sunday night, and we were permitted to have our dinner in the living room to watch the show. That was a real treat. I also thought the

astronauts were pretty cool.

*BHM: Diving, writing, filmmaking, photo-journalism – which came first, how did you connect them and why?*

JH: I had a small advertising and graphics company in Toronto and taught diving at night. The ad agency was the money. The diving was the relaxing bit. I knew I needed to find a way to bridge my two loves, so I sold the business, packed up and moved to the Cayman Islands for almost three years working as



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*BHM: I believe you own a record for your cave diving expertise.*

*JH: Yes, it was at Wakulla Springs for five hours at 300 feet.*

*BHM: What drives you to push the envelope?*

*JH: Life is a puzzle, and I believe that almost anything can be solved with the right tools,*

*patience and imagination. Exploration often leads me to push the limits of human endeavor, but it is always secondary to finding the answers for questions that drew me in the first place.*

*BHM: How do you see the future?*

*JH: It is an interesting time of change in our world. There is a great shaking up of old ways and old institutions that don't serve the population. Everything about how I work has changed. I have to work leaner, broader and smarter in every aspect of my business. I embrace that change as exciting, and I feel very positive about the world that will arise from the change we are experiencing today.*

*BHM: Are there any caves you will not dive?*

*JH: Definitely not!!!*

*BHM: What are your best and worst experiences?*

*JH: Antarctica and Antarctica. It was like going to another planet, but there were many physical and mental challenges.*



*JH: I was exposed to dry caves first. I always loved small spaces, but they feel even more comfortable to me when I am underwater.*

*BHM: What is your fascination with caves/overhead environments?*

*JH: Cave diving is like swimming in the veins of Mother Earth. It feels primordial. When I cave dive and follow the flow of water, I feel like I am seeing things that nobody has witnessed before...and many times, I am. I love the allure of exploration, and caves are perhaps the greatest source of the unknown.*

*BHM: When preparing for an expedition what are you looking for in team members?*

*JH: On expeditions, I might be looking for a particular talent beyond diving, such as an audio recordist or mechanic. I cannot afford a huge crew, so I need fewer people to cover more bases.*

*BHM: You are known as an expert in the use of closed circuit rebreathers. Recently, PADI's magazine, Undersea Journal, had an article discussing the launch of their Rebreather Diver and Advanced Rebreather Diver courses that address recreational divers diving with Type R rebreathers. The courses are*

*scheduled for announcement in the third quarter of this year. What are your thoughts and do you think it might be the wave of the future in diving?*

*JH: The industry is simplifying the Type R rebreathers so that they are automated and easier to use. I do not know if they are the wave of the future, but if the marketplace is up to it and willing to grow with it, it might be. There is nothing like diving with no bubbles, you can get really close to observe the animals.*

*BHM: What influences your selection of rebreathers?*

*JH: I have owned a lot of rebreathers,*

*but that is because I am always willing to look for the next greatest innovation. It is life support, and you should own the best thing you can afford. I have to be able to look my husband in the eye (he barely dives) and tell him that I am using the safest thing available to me.*

*BHM: Much of the work you are known for involves cave diving. Were you exposed to exploring dry caves before you started cave diving?*



I was also one of the closest calls I ever had.

*BHM: Can you tell me about it?*

JH: First, let me clarify. My worst experience was getting bent. Antarctica was another experience altogether. It was my first ever cave dive in an iceberg, and my two partners did not have experience with icebergs either. We were on a National Geographic assignment in 2001 to intercept and dive B-15, the world's largest recorded iceberg. [B-15 calved from the Ross Ice Shelf in March 2000 was larger, in area, than the island of Jamaica and estimated to weigh around three billion tonnes. Despite breaking up several times, after a decade parts of B-15 still have not melted.]

On the last dive, we were pinned inside the iceberg cave by the current. We were at 130 feet racking up deco, literally crawling on the bottom as the

current kept sucking us back into the iceberg. Later, in the evening, while back on board the ship, we heard a loud explosion; the iceberg exploded into a square mile of ice cubes. It also spawned an enormous wave. Diving the iceberg was an incredible and unique experience.

*BHM: How did you get started in filmmaking?*

JH: I did some TV work before I started filmmaking. In fact, the first story I wrote for film was the Antarctic film in 2001, and I have done a number of independent films since that time.

*BHM: If the whole world were listening, what would you tell them?*

JH: My biggest passion is working toward water literacy, teaching people gently how they are intertwined with their drink-

ing water resources and how they can be good stewards and protect those precious resources for the future. That means I talk to a lot of students, Rotary Clubs, organizations, etc. People must know where their drinking water comes from and understand that their actions on the surface of the Earth affect the quality of the

water beneath their feet. We will be fighting wars over water... not oil.

When I swim in underwater caves, I am acutely aware that I am swimming through the life blood of our planet. I get to swim through the very veins of Mother Earth. As I chase freshwater beneath the surface of the earth, I realize everything that we do on the surface of our porous planet will be returned to us to drink. I've seen the changes in the quality of water. I've noted the diminished flow that sometimes allows a cave system to choke and stop like a clogged artery in a heart attack.

There is a small infinite amount of clean fresh water on our planet, and I get to explore the limits of one of the largest windows on the underground on

Earth.

I think Florida is a microcosm of what is happening elsewhere. We are pumping more water out of the ground everyday than is replenished by rain. We are the largest water hogs east of the Mississippi using a gluttonous amount [of water] to create ridiculous golf course lawns that we cover with pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers that soak into the ground, flow through the landscape and pollute springs, rivers and lakes. All that eventually pours out in the nurseries we find in estuaries, and it causes horrible filamentous algae to explode on our coral reefs.

Don't get me wrong, it is not just lawns; there are many other sources of nitrate pollution, but it serves as a good example of how we, perhaps unknowingly, cause catastrophic events downstream from normal everyday actions in our homes.

I don't [think] anyone really wants to pollute or [they] would connect their lawns with our oceans, but I think my biggest and most important job in life is to help people make these connections and make better choices in their lives whether at work or at home. With edu-

cation and a lot of small changes, we can make a difference.

If we can increase water literacy and recognize clean water as a basic human right, the world will be a more peaceful place.

*BHM: Are you currently working on any new films?*

JH: Yes, two works are in progress: *Ben's Vortex*, which is about a diver who disappeared in vortex Springs and has never been found. The other production is *We Are Water*, which is about fresh water resources on our planet—our most precious resource. ■

*“When you do push the envelope and your experience fear, it is like there's a new boundary for what is possible.”*

*—Jill Heinerth.*

## RECORDS:

- Women Divers Hall of Fame
- Longest dive into an iceberg—2001: Three hours using Cis Lunar MK-5P rebreather. Water temperature -1.9°C (28.6°F).
- Longest deep cave penetration—1999 (Women): 3,050 meters (10,000 feet) cave penetration at a depth of 91 meters (300 feet) for five hours during a science and mapping dive at Wakulla Springs.

## BOOKS:

- Essentials of cave diving* (2010)
- Cave diving: Articles and opinions* (2008)
- Digital underwater photography* (2010)
- Side mount profile* (2010)

## PUBLISHED IN:

- National Geographic*
- Smithsonian*
- Deep* (China)
- Diver* (China)
- Wired*
- All recognized dive publications and countless newspapers and Web sites

## FEATURED IN:

- Sports Illustrated for Women*
- National Geographic*
- National Geographic Adventure*
- Undersea Journal*
- Sport Diver*

Contributor to numerous Tech Diving publications

## FILM AND TELEVISION:

Credits for more than 30 various productions including the PBS production of *Water's Journey* a documentary series that takes viewers on a journey through the world's greatest water systems.

For more information on Jill Heinerth, visit her web sites:  
[www.IntoThePlanet.com](http://www.IntoThePlanet.com)  
[www.RebreatherPro.com](http://www.RebreatherPro.com)