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Suburban diving program gives veterans pain relief, teamwork



Army veteran Matt Woodin of Plano, left, and Mara Bell of Munich, Germany, center, participate in a scuba diving class in Aurora through the Downers Grove nonprofit Diveheart, run by founder and president Jim Elliott, right.

Brian Hill | Staff Photographer



Marie Wilson

Army veteran Kirk Williams knows the benefits of scuba diving through a nonprofit organization called Diveheart. So does Coast Guard veteran Kevin Cozzie.

"The weightlessness kind of helps my body release itself," Cozzie said. "I can feel it when I get out of the water."

Both feel pain relief and stress relief from the high-skill water activity that also gives them connections with other veterans that are so intrinsic in the military and so sorely lacking in the civilian world.

"It's the camaraderie," Cozzie said. "That's the thing I find most veterans miss."

Cozzie, who works as outreach coordinator at the [Aurora Vet Center \(https://www.va.gov/directory/guide](https://www.va.gov/directory/guide)

</facility.asp?ID=5938>), has gone diving five times, and Williams, of Warrenville, has been diving for five years. But both get to help newbies such as Army veteran Matt Woodin of Plano, even as they experience the benefits of scuba themselves. That's what keeps Williams coming back.

"It's just the people, really," Williams said. "People that have a true love for the sport."

Such is the beauty of the Diveheart (<http://www.diveheart.org/>) SCUBA Experience, which takes small groups of up to six people with disabilities at a time for two-hour excursions in pools at recreation centers, universities and hotels, said Jim Elliott, Diveheart's founder and president.

A subset of the Downers Grove-based organization founded in 2001, called Diveheart Military Wounded, it focuses on providing the physical benefits (water pressure, weightlessness) and mental benefits (learning new skills, gaining confidence) to former military members whose service left them disabled.

In managing his fibromyalgia pain, for which he takes medication, Williams, 47, said he feels the physical difference.

"When you get down under pressure," he said, "the pressure causes chemical reactions and hormone releases that help alleviate those problems."

And in coping with his post-traumatic stress disorder, he said he feels the mental benefits as well. It's like he has a new identity. No longer Kirk, the disabled veteran, he's now Kirk the scuba diver.

One recent Friday at the Vaughan Athletic Center in Aurora, Kirk the scuba diver gave some pointers to Diveheart newcomer Woodin before official instruction for the novice diver began.

In a pool like the one at the Vaughan center, it's a low-stakes introduction at a no-rush pace, as Elliott teaches veterans how to check all the required gear for safety, how to clear the regulator (breathing tube) and how to properly weight themselves to become "neutrally buoyant."

"You can always stand up if you have a problem," Elliott said.

From early pool experiences, divers can build up to outdoor excursions, too, at lakes in Wisconsin or more tropical destinations.

Elliott, who's not a veteran himself but is the son of one, said it's powerful to see wounded former soldiers or sailors gain new technical knowledge, a new hobby and an unexpected therapy all at once. "It's really about physical therapy and zero-gravity," he said.

- Do you know of veterans helping other veterans, doing good things for their community or who have an interesting story to tell? Share your story at veterans@dailyherald.com.

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