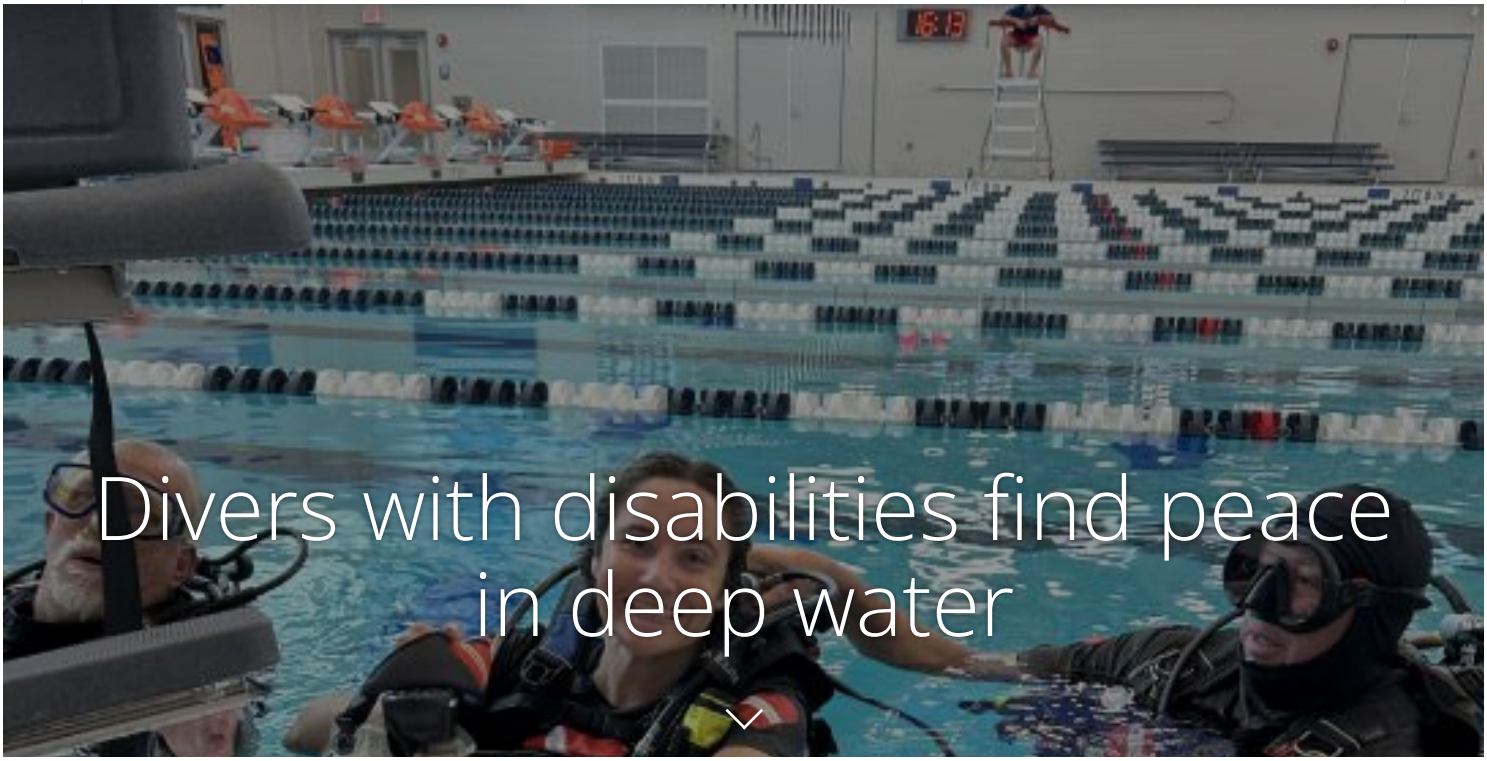


Divers with disabilities find peace in deep water

By **Kate Silver**
Photography by **Kevin Serna**

More than a dozen scuba divers dot the pool's turquoise waters, swimming in groups of threes and fours in dark wetsuits and face masks. Excited chatter, splashing, and the occasional squeal of delight pierce the humid, chlorine-scented air, a contrast to the frigid conditions outside on this January morning.

To the uninformed observer, the people in the pool at a high school in suburban Chicago are indistinguishable from one another. But Jim Elliott, a member of the Rotary Club of Downers Grove, Illinois, knows the different groups, and why they're here: the instructors who are leading the sessions, the dive buddies serving as safety companions, and the rookie divers, who are learning to navigate deep waters with autism, brain injuries, paralysis, and other conditions. Some family members, too, are learning to dive. They're all gathered for a monthly open pool session hosted by Diveheart, a nonprofit that Elliott founded that teaches people with disabilities using an approach known as adaptive diving.

Experience a Diveheart pool session in our video story. **Watch**

Bill Bogdan approaches the edge of the pool. It's an exciting day for the 55-year-old father, a volunteer and a member of the organization's board of directors: Two of

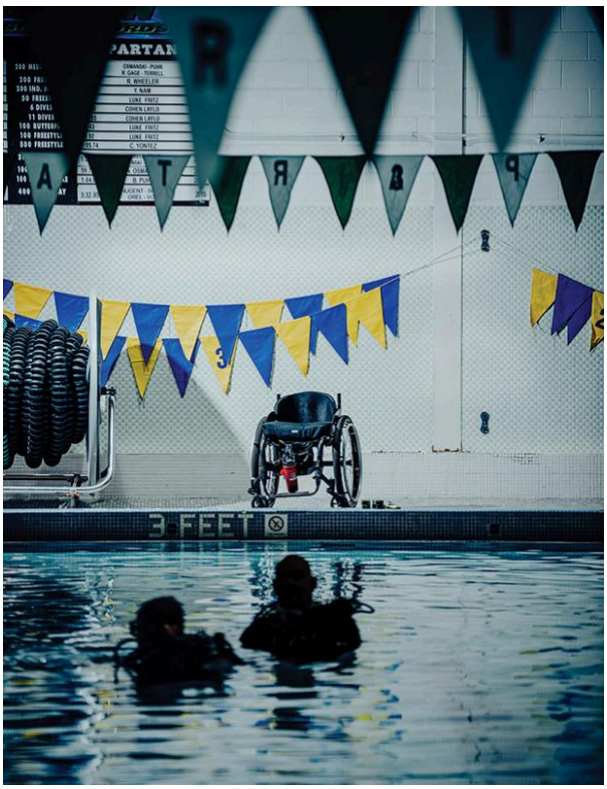
his children are learning to scuba dive in preparation for a family trip to Mexico this summer.

As his kids listen intently to the instructor, Bogdan decides to join everyone in the pool. His muscular arms flex as he lowers himself out of his wheelchair. He lands roughly on the ground, then shifts his legs, which are paralyzed, into the water and pushes himself in. He surfaces with a smile. “It’s one of the only places in the world I can go where I don’t need my wheelchair,” he says.

‘Scuba therapy’

When Elliott launched Diveheart in 2001, his vision was simple: He wanted to introduce people with limited mobility to scuba diving, a sport that he loved. Intuitively, he thought someone with, say, a spinal cord injury could benefit from the sensation of weightlessness in the water. He hoped to make scuba more accessible and welcoming to all.

“The thrill for me is when a diver first looks down, and they go, ‘Oh my God, I’m standing up. I’m not in my wheelchair,” Elliott says.



The nonprofit Diveheart introduces people with an array of disabilities to “scuba therapy.”

What he quickly learned, however, is that “scuba therapy,” as Elliott and others call it, can benefit people with a whole array of physical, cognitive, and mental conditions. In addition to training divers with paralysis, including people with paraplegia and quadriplegia, Diveheart has trained people with cerebral palsy,

multiple sclerosis, limited vision or blindness, ALS, autism, and post-traumatic stress disorder, among other conditions.

Diveheart instructors and volunteer buddies go through dive training as well as "empathy training" so they can be sensitive to adaptive divers' needs. That may mean restricting their legs or arms, for example, and relying on other people to place and remove their face mask.

During those trainings, in particular, Elliott says he feels his Rotary pride coming through. It's challenging work, learning how to best help an individual who may not be able to communicate verbally, or who uses a wheelchair and must be safely moved to and from a boat and into the water. By their very nature, he says, the sessions are guided by a sense of Service Above Self. The values of Rotary are the values of Diveheart.

Diveheart sessions near its Downers Grove headquarters take place in pools and deep quarry lakes in Illinois and Wisconsin, and there are affiliate Diveheart chapters elsewhere in the United States and the world. The nonprofit has built relationships with resorts and trained dive operators globally, and it leads group trips to places like the Caribbean islands of Cozumel, Grenada, and Roatán. Often, entire families will join those trips, and for many it's their first international adventure.

"I tell people this really isn't about scuba diving," says Elliott. "This is about taking an individual with a disability and creating a paradigm shift. So now it's not 'Johnny in a wheelchair.' It's 'Johnny the scuba diver.' And then they go on and they take on other challenges."

A passageway to serenity

After Amber Rangel was paralyzed from the chest down in a waterskiing accident and nearly drowned, she wanted nothing to do with water. Prior to the accident, the 20-year-old was a semiprofessional barefoot waterskiing athlete, tearing along the water in slalom and tricks competitions. Afterward, all it took were a few droplets of water splashed on her face while bathing to trigger her emotions.

This new reality, including using a wheelchair, felt stifling. "A lot of my friends were leaving for college or starting families, or just doing the coolest stuff that a 20-year-old could do," she says. "And I was having incontinence issues and scared to shower."

Amber Rangel prepares for a pool dive at the University of Illinois in 2022, and heads out for a dive in Utila, Honduras, in 2016.

Images credit: Adora Rangel

Rangel found she enjoyed adaptive snow skiing, and two of her instructors, also volunteers with Diveheart, encouraged her to consider diving. She sat with the idea for a long time before accepting the invitation. She worked through her fear of the water, and when she got in the pool, she started to see possibilities. “This was a chance to do something different and to do something new,” she says. She felt relieved to be in the water standing, weightless, and far away from her wheelchair.

Until then, Rangel hadn’t thought much about traveling, but she was drawn to the idea of diving in the ocean. She joined a Diveheart group trip to Cozumel, off Mexico’s Yucatán Peninsula, and it lit a fire in her. Soon after, she traveled to Honduras and dove with Diveheart instructors. She found that diving was a passageway to serenity and feeling weightless — more about the sensations than the sights. “I want to get out of the wheelchair,” she says. “And I like to be able to just float.”

Those early travel experiences built her confidence, so much so that she returned to Honduras every few months solo, diving by day and staying with a local or in a hostel by night. She liked the people there and found it was easier to get around in a wheelchair than back home. “I struggled more making it to a Starbucks in Chicago than I struggled making it in Honduras,” she says. “People just treated me differently there.”

Those trips helped her work through a lot of anger, she says. In Honduras, she realized that she still had control over who she was and the person she wanted to become. She booked more international trips — sometimes diving, sometimes not — visiting Bali, Iceland, Tulum.

Prior to her injury, Rangel had dropped out of high school. She needed an education and a steady income to keep diving and exploring the world on her terms. She got her GED, enrolled in college, and in 2024, at age 30, she graduated with honors from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Now, she's in the process of applying to law school. And she credits scuba diving for continually pushing her to do better and to be better, both in the water and on land.

Instrumental support from Rotary

In the early days, Elliott hung flyers in dive shops to find participants, volunteers, and instructors. He talked up the fledgling organization at Rotary club meetings, joining Rotary himself in 2003.

"Rotary has been a super support system for us, from the beginning," says Tinamarie Hernandez, Diveheart's executive director, also a member of the Rotary Club of Downers Grove. "It's important to be a part of the community and that's what Rotary is."

Rotary members Tinamarie Hernandez and Jim Elliott have found support from fellow Rotarians in other cities as they expand their program's reach.

Following a presentation to a club in Oak Lawn, for example, Elliott met the superintendent of Oak Lawn Community High School, who offered him access to

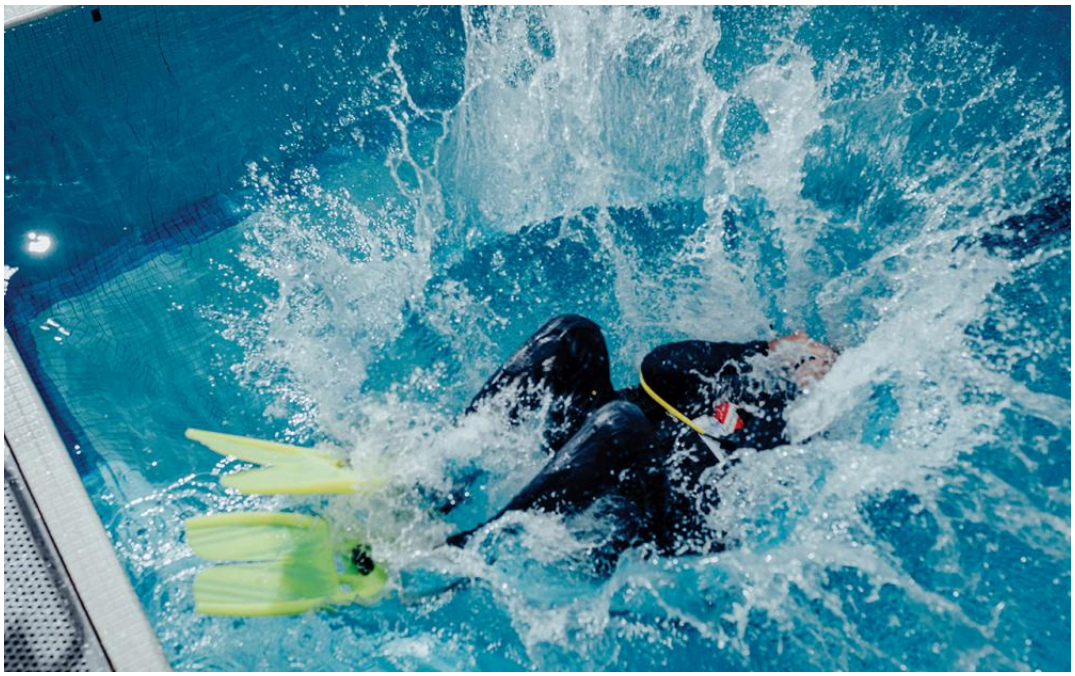
the school's pool. Today, it's Diveheart's longest-running pool program, at more than a decade.

Word spread about the organization, fueled in no small part by Elliott's knack for storytelling and his media connections. Stories splashed across NBC, CNN, *Money* magazine, *Success* magazine, and other outlets, and interest soared. In 2008, U.S. Army veteran Tammy Duckworth, who lost her legs in the Iraq War, made news when she dove with Diveheart. At the time she was the director of the **Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs**; today she's a U.S. senator.

As dive instructors in other cities reached out to inquire about starting their own adaptive diving chapter, Elliott told them to first make sure to get Rotary members involved. "We don't start up a program unless the person we're working with sets up Rotary meetings," says Elliott. "They are absolutely instrumental."

In 2010, Diveheart had a booth at the **Rotary International Convention** in Montreal. There, Elliott met Rotarians from Haifa, Israel, who wanted to set up a diving program for kids with autism. He worked with them to raise money for scuba gear and other equipment.

Around the world, Elliott estimates that around 50 adaptive diving nonprofits have started thanks to the training and support of Diveheart. While a handful of those are considered Diveheart chapters, most are independent nonprofits. "Our goal now is to grow adaptive scuba around the world and keep improving our training practices to be the standard-bearer for best practices," he says.



Diving instructor Bruce Bittner takes the plunge during training at a high school pool in Oak Lawn, Illinois.

Diveheart has also captured the attention of medical professionals. Elliott regularly speaks at medical conferences about the benefits of scuba therapy. At diving trade shows, Diveheart hosted adaptive scuba symposiums that drew researchers, physicians, professors, and therapists. And in recent years, Diveheart began offering continuing education units for people in the medical field.

Some small research studies indicate that diving may have measurable benefits for people with post-traumatic stress disorder, autism, and physical disabilities. Richard Moon, who researches diving medicine at Duke University School of Medicine, says that, anecdotally, diving is known to improve a person's mood, alleviate depression and anxiety, and help people relax. "People often tell me, 'Well, I'm very anxious, but once I get in the water, I have a terrific time,'" he says.

Moon became acquainted with Diveheart through a physician colleague. "There are a lot of reasons why some people shouldn't dive, at least by the book," he says. "To be able to take people who are handicapped in various ways and allow them to dive is a fabulous thing."

Redefining abilities

Veronica DeJong learned about Diveheart two years ago while attending a support group for people with traumatic brain injuries. At the time, she was 29 years old and didn't know how to swim.

Just three years prior, DeJong had a headache that grew so severe she was vomiting and seeing double. At the hospital, she learned she had blood clots throughout the venous sinuses of her brain that were causing pressure to build on her optic nerves. "I had all of the symptoms of a stroke," she says.

Adaptive diver Veronica DeJong gets some help putting on her mask.

In the aftermath, she was still seeing double. Vision therapy has helped, but her spatial awareness and depth perception remain altered, as does her short-term memory. Multitasking can be overwhelming, and she's no longer able to drive.

When DeJong heard about Diveheart, she loved the idea of throwing herself into something new and different. While afraid of the water, she felt emboldened by her recent health emergency. "I just kept telling myself, I handled blood clots in my brain. I can do this."

Over time, she made her way from the shallow end of the Oak Lawn pool to the deep end, learning to swim as she learned to scuba dive. In the water, she doesn't have to worry about whether she'll trip and fall like she does on land. Plus, she always dives with buddies who are aware that she has memory challenges, and she knows they have her back.

In 2024, DeJong traveled to the Cayman Islands with a group of women through Diveheart and dove in the ocean for the first time. Storms limited the actual time diving, but the trip, overall, felt like a victory. It was DeJong's first time leaving the U.S. and made her feel like anything was possible. "Everybody has different abilities. I'm just redefining what my abilities are," she says. "Accepting my new normal has been difficult but doing it through Diveheart has been amazing."

A new dream

As a child, Jim Elliott had a life filled with colorful characters, each with their own challenges. His father was an Army veteran who used a wheelchair and orthotic braces to get around. "I grew up dodging wheelchairs at the VA hospital," he laughs.

Later, Elliott's daughter, Erin, was born blind. When she was about 9 years old, kids at school teased her about her eyes, and she became obstinate. "She threw down her cane and refused to learn Braille," he recalls.

This was in the late '80s, and a coworker told Elliott about an organization called the **American Blind Skiing Foundation**, which teaches people with blindness and visual impairment how to ski while accompanied by guides. Within days, Erin was hitting the slopes, and her dad saw her confidence grow. She'd go to school and tell stories about her weekends on the slopes, giddy with her new identity: She was a skier. At the same time, Elliott became a ski guide and volunteered with the organization for about 25 years — long after Erin had grown up and moved on. "I saw it change a lot of lives," he says.

"It's one of the only places in the world where I don't need my wheelchair," Bill Bogdan says poolside.

For as long as he can remember, Elliott was eager to try new things and prepare for any scenario. He studied journalism in college in the 1970s, at a time when oceanographer Jacques Cousteau was delighting TV viewers with his underwater discoveries.

"As a young journalist, I thought, if I ever meet someone like Jacques Cousteau, I better know how to scuba dive," Elliott says. He was captivated by the world he found underwater. "It was like being a superhero, just hovering in the middle of an intersection," he says. "The body, mind, and spirit experience was so powerful for me, I knew at some point I wanted to be an instructor."

It was much later in life — after raising a family and leading a successful career as a media advertising sales executive — that he returned to the idea of teaching people to dive. He wanted to see scuba diving change lives in the same way he'd seen skiing do so. He left his job and his six-figure salary to start Diveheart, hoping to build a small nonprofit in the Chicago area that used local pools and maybe took a trip to a quarry or the coast from time to time. He had no idea just how much adaptive diving would resonate, or how much Rotary would help to foster its growth.

Looking to the future, Elliott has his sights on the next ambitious goal: the Diveheart deep pool project, which will be built on donated land north of Chicago. He's been working with architects and engineers to design a pool that would be the deepest in the country, at 130 feet, enabling divers to descend to ocean-level depths without having to travel to the coast or navigate weather disruptions. Diveheart is raising money to construct the pool, which will have multiple levels in a

patented telescoping design. When built, it will be used for research, rehabilitation, education, and training, and will offer vocational opportunities to people of all abilities.

A shared experience

Water has been an important part of Bill Bogdan's life for as long as he can remember. When he was just 8 months old, he was diagnosed with a type of cancer on his spine called neuroblastoma. The removal of the tumor resulted in paralysis in his legs. Swimming and water therapy helped strengthen his muscles, and his parents put in an above-ground pool. A friend from high school got him interested in scuba diving, leading him to pursue certification through the **Handicapped Scuba Association**.

Bogdan still gets emotional when he remembers his first diving trip in the Bahamas when he was in his 20s. The dive crew wouldn't let him take his wheelchair on the boat, because they worried it wouldn't be stable in the choppy water. At first, he was reluctant to leave the chair behind — he was rarely apart from it. But once he got in the water, he felt like a different person. "For three hours, I almost forgot that I had a disability, because I was able to do three dives," he says. "And the whole time, no wheelchair, no nothing. I was in the water, going swimming, checking out the marine life, checking out the coral, just having a blast."

He was thrilled to later learn about Diveheart and joined the organization as a volunteer, eager to help other people with disabilities experience diving. His experience has also inspired everyone in his family to learn to dive — first, his wife and oldest daughter, and now, the two children at the pool today.

If all goes according to plan, their first ocean dive as a family will happen this summer on a Diveheart trip to Cozumel. It's something Bogdan has dreamed of for years, and he can't wait to tell the stories when he gets back.

"I always tell people, don't let your disability be your handicap," he says. "There's nothing you can't do."

This story originally appeared in the August 2025 issue of ***Rotary*** magazine.

Rotary clubs operate around the globe and online, in a variety of formats. Which one is right for you?

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