



Benefiting Individuals with Autism

“Science is increasingly supporting what we’ve known to be true for years,” said Jim Elliott, president and founder of Diveheart. The non-profit, based in Downers Grove and with chapters around the world, provides scuba-diving instruction and opportunities to children, adults and veterans with disabilities.

“We’ve long seen the remarkable value that scuba-diving has on individuals with virtually every type of disability,” Elliott said. “Divers who are on the autism spectrum in particular benefit from the sensory environment provided through scuba-diving.”

One of Diveheart’s star divers, Amy Lippert, has enjoyed scuba-diving since she was first introduced to it in 2006. The now 26-year-old resident of Palos Heights has autism, and struggles with social skills and communication. Her parents learned about Diveheart through the special recreation

swim coach with the Oak Lawn Park District, and decided to give it a try.

“Scuba-diving is inherently hyperbaric; the pressure increases as you descend in the water,” Elliott said. “This can be very therapeutic for individuals with autism. Furthermore, divers find that the absence of noise and stimulation underwater is soothing and peaceful. Participants value the sensory freedom.”

Amy enjoyed scuba-diving from the start.

“She enjoys the water and is alert to people and her surroundings while she’s scuba-diving,” her father Ray said. “She looks forward to going to Diveheart events, and enjoys the time with her friends and family and being part of the group.”

An added benefit of scuba-diving to the Lipperts is the fact that it has become an activity

in which the entire family participates together. Amy’s twin sisters Mary and Marie, each 24, began diving with Amy early on, joined shortly thereafter by her parents.

Mary, Marie and Amy’s mother Ruth all became open-water certified. The family now volunteers at Diveheart events, and has traveled with the organization to the Florida Keys. ■

