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Tinamarie Hernandez introduces persons with disabilities to underwater world of scuba diving

It takes an extraordinary type of scuba diver to safely accompany someone with a physical or cognitive disability underwater for an extended period of time.

Chicago's [Tinamarie Hernandez](#) is one of those rare scuba enthusiasts specially trained for such a delicate undertaking, having attained certification as an "adaptive dive buddy" through the [Diveheart](#) organization.

"Diveheart uses scuba as a therapeutic means to build confidence, self-esteem and independence in people with disabilities," said Tinamarie, a quality assurance associate manager and 19-year Accenture employee.

She explained that people with varying forms of paralysis or missing limbs find themselves at home in and under the water through the experience of "adaptive" scuba diving. Children and adults of varying abilities can also benefit from the calming yet challenging underwater environment, which is especially true in people with autism and military veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Tinamarie notes that people with visual or hearing impairment aren't affected by the sensory deprivation of scuba diving.

"People who are deaf can communicate better under water than most people who can hear because they know sign language," she said. "We've had people with autism who we thought were nonverbal come up from the water speaking clearly. It's been an amazing inspiration for me."

She adds that individuals will begin their free scuba experience with Diveheart in a pool and advance to a lake or ocean environment as they become more accustomed to diving and using a regulator under the close supervision of their dive buddies.



"This experience has helped me realize all the skills I could bring from Accenture to this great organization," says Tinamarie (right).

Leading above and below the surface

Tinamarie has immersed herself in Diveheart activities since joining the Illinois (US)-based non-profit in 2001 to the point of becoming its executive director three years ago. In fact, she has helped write many of Diveheart's protocols and procedures to ensure dive safety, maximize the enjoyment of scuba for participants and help the charitable organization reach its fundraising goals.

"This experience has helped me realize all the skills I could bring from Accenture to this great organization," she said. "I just love it."

Tinamarie recently returned from a 20-day trip to Cebu City, Philippines where she helped train four new "adaptive scuba instructors" and two "advanced adaptive dive buddies". She also led a symposium for local dive professionals, physical and occupational therapists and persons with disabilities on the merits of scuba diving, as well as a Diveheart demonstration for 20 students at a local vocational rehabilitation center.

It was then on to Singapore for an adaptive scuba demonstration to promote commercial diving opportunities for people with disabilities, followed by Malaysia for a dive session with adaptive divers at the Technical Welding Institute. She ended the trip with a presentation to spinal cord injury rehabilitation doctors and patients at the University of Malaysia.

"We're learning new things all the time about the benefits of adaptive scuba diving," Tinamarie said. "We hope to build the world's first deep water therapy pool."

Diveheart teams in the US are located in Atlanta, southern and central Florida and southern California, with expansion coming to the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore.