

Engage

College of DuPage—
your community college

Vol. 1, No. 2

From COD to CEO

Jim Elliott's Diveheart
inspires adaptive divers
to focus on abilities,
not disabilities





A Message from the President

In this second issue of *Engage*, you will learn about some of the entrepreneurial people, programs, and partnerships that set College of DuPage apart. This kind of innovative spirit benefits not only our students, but also our community, its companies, its nonprofit organizations and—most important—the people who live and work here. In some cases, our entrepreneurial graduates are also helping people around the world.

When many people think of higher education, especially community colleges, they imagine instructors sharing a fixed set of information that leads to a degree or certificate. At College of DuPage, we do that, of course, but just as often, we instill analytical thinking, creativity, problem solving and other tools that lead to invention and reinvention over time.

The word “entrepreneurship” is most often associated with the business world, but virtually every profession requires entrepreneurial thinking. Organizations, technology and society change quickly. So our nonprofits, our small businesses, our arts organizations,

our major corporations, our health companies and our government—all must be innovative and entrepreneurial.

At College of DuPage, we help make innovation happen through resources and collaboration, such as our Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation DuPage.

We bring innovative faculty members to the classroom—people with real-world experience who have reinvented themselves in their working lives.

Finally, we spark imagination, broaden experiences and encourage entrepreneurship among our students. That, after all, is the best way we know to launch new organizations, boost existing ones, and help support job growth throughout the district we serve.

We hope you enjoy this inside look at the innovation you make possible through College of DuPage.

—Ann Rondeau is president of College of DuPage.

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Photos of Jim Elliott by Art Carrillo/special to College of DuPage. Special thanks to DoubleTree Suites by Hilton Hotel & Conference Center, Downers Grove.

From COD to CEO

COD alum and Diveheart founder Jim Elliott is a breath of fresh oxygen for people with disabilities

The stereotypical college-to-career story goes like this:

Go to school.
Earn your degree in a particular field.
Go to work in that field.

But sometimes, even the most remote collegiate experience can make an unexpected impact long after the student has left the classroom.

Case in point: COD alumnus Jim Elliott.

Elliott studied journalism at COD. After earning his associate degree, he earned a bachelor's in sports writing from Northern Illinois University.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the press box.

An entrepreneur since he started caddying at Riverside Golf Club at age 12, Elliott quickly moved from sports writing to advertising sales.

He remained in the media business for two decades, working as an advertising executive for the Chicago Tribune Media Group, WGN and CLTV.

Then, despite his annual six-figure salary, he quit. Instead of selling space and time, he founded a nonprofit organization—one that has since helped thousands of people with disabilities in Illinois and around the world.

And it all started not with a journalism class—but a scuba diving class—at College of DuPage.

Elliott, now 61, is the founder of the Diveheart Foundation (www.diveheart.org). Established in Downers Grove in 2001, this non-profit 501(c)3 organization set out to “build confidence and independence and self esteem in children, adults [including military veterans] with disabilities through scuba diving.”

Yes, you read that correctly: Diveheart helps people who've lost limbs; people who suffer from chronic pain; people with cerebral palsy, traumatic brain injuries, autism and other conditions by getting them into the water and breathing oxygen from tanks on their backs.

And yes, this is all headquartered in the flatlands of Chicagoland.

The Diveheart seed was planted when Elliott's daughter Erin was born blind in 1980. Elliott and his wife initially thought their daughter might be brain damaged. When it turned out, instead, to be blindness, they were delighted.

“We can work with that,” said Elliott.

As a mainstreamed student, Erin was teased about her eyes. When Elliott learned about a snow skiing program designed for blind children, he encouraged Erin to enroll. It became a favorite father-daughter activity. It helped build her confidence and self esteem. It helped reduce the teasing.

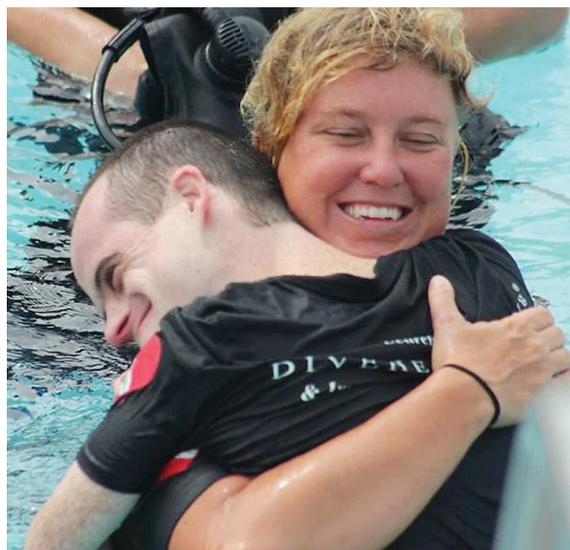
“She went from Erin the blind girl to Erin the skier,” said Elliott.

The impact on Erin also got Elliott thinking: If snow skiing can do this for blind people, what could scuba diving do for people with disabilities? He toyed with the idea for a dozen years.

“I just didn't know how to make it happen,” said Elliott.

But like a lot of things in his life, Elliott the entrepreneur figured it out.

By the year 2000, Elliott's four children (including Erin) were grown and living on their own. He was divorced. His grandmother needed some help to live independently in her home, so Elliott-the-former-ad-guy became Elliott-the-caregiver. He also founded



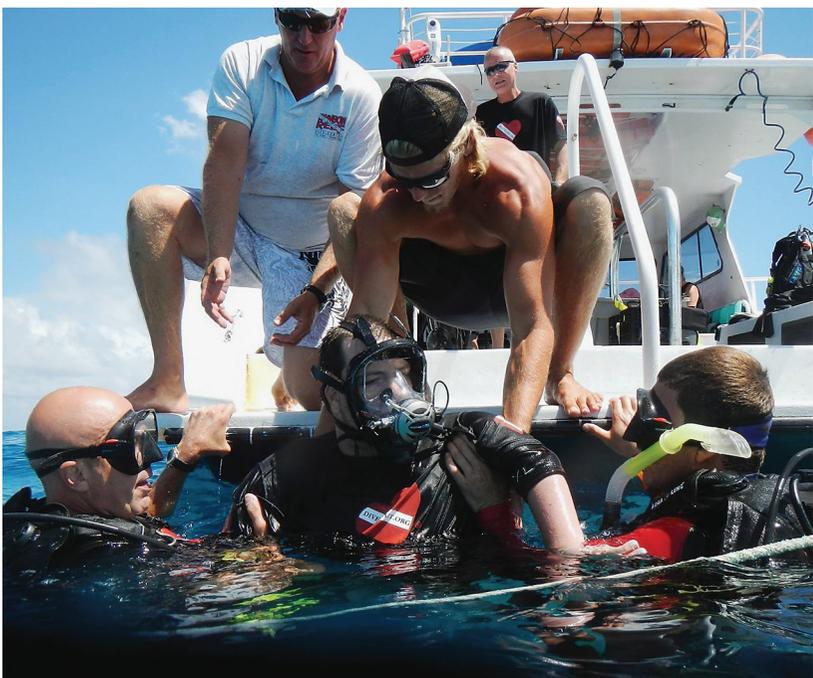
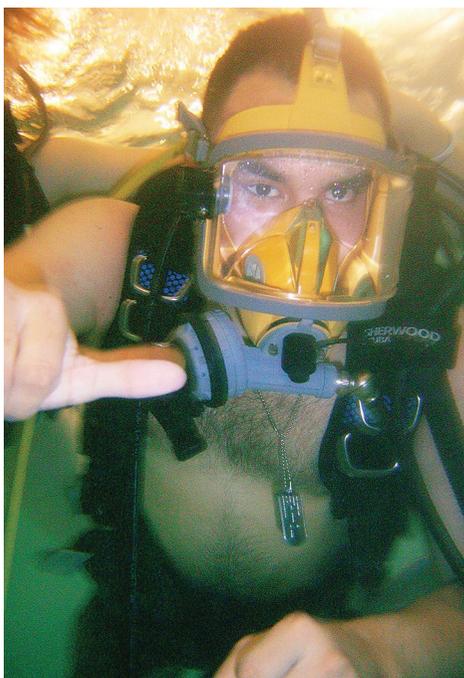
“People move from depression to fireball. They go on to do amazing things in the world. Diving gives them a purpose. They feel valued.”

—COD alum and Diveheart founder Jim Elliott

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Clockwise from top: Jim Elliott dives with Ana Calvo, who was born without limbs; an adaptive diver is carefully assisted with their entry into the water by a Diveheart crew; veterans Greg Rodriguez (below left) and Terry Thomas (left, with Jim) were participants in the Diveheart Military Wounded program, a division of Diveheart.



“The benefits to the body, mind and spirit are amazing.”

Diveheart out of his grandmother’s spare bedroom. “There was scuba gear all over the place,” said Elliott.

In the 17 years since its founding, Diveheart has become a world leader in scuba training and experiences for people with “different abilities.” The big benefit, Elliott said, is the absence of gravity.

“There are lots of disability therapy programs,” said Elliott. “But we own zero gravity.”

While people with physical disabilities might one day benefit from space travel, Elliott said, that’s not practical or affordable right now.

“Water is inner space,” said Elliott. “Being an aquanaut is cheaper and faster than being an astronaut.”

Through Diveheart, people who can’t stand on their own find themselves vertical underwater. People who can’t move without wheelchairs are self-propelled beneath the surface.

Whether in a swimming pool with Diveheart volunteers in Illinois or in the ocean with Diveheart-trained professionals off the coast of Florida or Cozumel, the paradigm shift, said Elliott, is dramatic.

“The benefits to the body, mind and spirit are amazing,” said Elliott. “People move from depression to fireball.

They go on to do amazing things in the world. Diving gives them a purpose. They feel valued.”

Elliott said the positive impact is both physical and emotional. In fact, Diveheart has worked with university researchers to prove some of those benefits, including the benefits of breathing oxygen in deep ocean water to help people dealing with chronic pain.

One well-known Illinoisan who accepted Elliott’s invitation to take the Diveheart plunge at a local swimming pool in 2012 was Tammy Duckworth—at

the time a veterans’ affairs professional (now a U.S. Senator). Duckworth lost her right leg near the hip and her left leg below the knee during combat in Iraq.

“I was apprehensive,” Duckworth said of her Diveheart experience. “You lose a lot of strength. You lose a lot of confidence,” Duckworth said of her experience as a paraplegic. “But with the buoyancy of the water and zero gravity, I felt strong and powerful. I was able to keep up with everybody else, just using my arms. It was very liberating.”

In the past 17 years, Diveheart has evolved into a sophisticated nonprofit. Contributions in 2016 totaled \$362,290, with expenses of \$378,000. Diveheart employs only a few part-time staffers. Elliott, who works full time, takes no salary. Even when Elliott travels, he bums space from friends to unfurl his bedroll. It’s all part of his philosophy of doing a lot for a little.

“Right now, we’re down a vehicle,” he said, ever the salesman. “If you know anyone, we need a Suburban or a Tahoe. And we have 2,000 square feet of donated gear in a basement. We need volunteers to work on equipment.”

Elliott said the journalism, public relations and

marketing skills he honed at COD come in handy every day. And his sales skills help convince donors, sponsors and volunteers to pitch in. Diveheart has been covered over the years by “CNN Heroes with Heart,” “NBC World News Tonight,” “HLN Stories of Courage,” “CNN Money,” *Huffington Post*, and many Chicago-area media.

One person who’s taken the Diveheart plunge only once: Elliott’s daughter, Erin. Her reasoning: “Skiing is my thing, Dad. Diving’s yours.”



“I was apprehensive ... but with the buoyancy of the water and zero gravity, I felt strong and powerful. I was able to keep up with everybody else, just using my arms. It was very liberating.”

—U.S. Senator Tammy Duckworth