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They're buoyed by going under water

By Janelle Walker For Sun-Times Media February 23, 2014 5:12PM

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ELGIN — Jordan Thomas was uncertain about his first scuba diving class at The Centre of Elgin's pool, said his parents, Steve and Gina Thomas.

Just before getting into the water, he started asking his dad if he really had to go in.

But right after he got in the water for the first time in January, he turned to them and waved. "That is when I knew he was OK," Gina said.

Jordan, 16, is diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, part of the autism spectrum. His scuba class is offered through the Northern Illinois Special Recreation Association and Diveheart. He's been learning on Sundays at the Centre's pool.

Based in Downers Grove, Diveheart volunteers provide scuba instruction for children and adults with disabilities. Those disabilities run the gamut from children born without arms and legs to those in the autism spectrum, said Jim Elliott, Diveheart's founder.

Learning to scuba dive gives participants confidence, independence and self-esteem, said the Downers Grove resident.

Less than 1 percent of the total population can scuba dive, and it is seen by many as a highly valued skill practiced by only the elite, he said. "It is something that able-bodied people don't do, or are afraid to do."

When his students get in the water and its zero-gravity environment, some get to move limbs they can't on the ground. Others get to have the mobility they never could on land, Elliott added.

Jordan said the difference between being in the pool in scuba gear was the difference between feeling "light" in the water but "heavy" on land.

Kara Repsys is the regional coordinator for the special recreation association, which helps to provide recreation experiences for people with special needs. In the two years that NISRA has offered the course, a dozen or so people have participated. The classes cost \$10 a session for staff time — Diveheart does not charge for its services, she said.

Gina Thomas found out about the scuba program from Repsys.

"I didn't think Jordan would want to do it. When we came the first time, he was very nervous," Mom said.

But since that first class, Jordan has embraced the sport and is now looking forward to a dive trip to the Florida Keys in June. His dad, Steve Thomas, is now planning to relearn scuba himself to join his son on the trip.

"I was in the pool years ago" learning scuba but had never gone on a dive, Steve said. Getting qualified for the trip gives him another opportunity to do something special with his son, he said.

His son also loves the one-on-one interaction he gets from the adults, Steve said.

Each student usually has two dive instructors with them, explained Wendy Foster, communications coordinator for Diveheart.

They work with disabled students on things such as using their lungs to control buoyancy, Elliott said. Because pressure is often used as

therapy for autism-spectrum disorders, the pressure underwater and learning to control breathing can be therapeutic for their students, he said.

He and Diveheart hope to bring the scuba diving experience — and scuba diving as therapy — to more people, he added. Studies are ongoing on how the pressure of being underwater and the zero-gravity feeling of floating can help in different therapies, from spinal cord injuries to autism, he said.

Hopes are to construct a 130-foot-deep dive pool somewhere in the Chicago area to provide more opportunities for diving here, Elliott said. Construction costs, however, are estimated at \$50 million.

He started Diveheart when he began giving classes at Good Samaritan Hospital's therapy pool in 1997. The program grew from there, and he now teaches others across the globe how to offer adaptive scuba, Elliott said.

Since then, he also has seen military veterans learn to control and alleviate pain from diving at depth, and autistic kids improve their communication skills, too.

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