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Moving Picture: Ex-exec gives freedom of scuba diving to disabled



Jim Elliott helps Ryan O' Toole under water during their scuba lesson in a hotel pool. Elliott was an executive who changed careers after his blind daughter inspired him.

Mark Welsh | Staff Photographer



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Ryan O' Toole describes it as "the greatest feeling in the world."

O'Toole is talking about scuba diving. Actually, he's typing, not talking, because typing is the only way the 31-year-old West Dundee man can communicate. He is bound to a wheelchair by Leigh's Disease, or Leigh's syndrome, a neurological disorder that has imprisoned him in

his body but not impaired his mind.

In scuba diving, however, O'Toole has found an extraordinary release from his prison, even for a little while.

In the water, buoyancy offsets the force of gravity, allowing O'Toole to move with a greater range of motion. Motion improves, circulation improves, Ryan's life improves.

He has now taken the plunge four times thanks to Jim Elliott, 57, president and founder of Diveheart, a nonprofit in Downers Grove.

Elliott started training people with disabilities and missing limbs in the art of scuba diving in 1997.

"This is everything," Elliott said.

His true inspiration, he says, came from his daughter Erin, born blind and now 34 and married with a child.

One day she threw down her walking cane and declared that she didn't want to settle for being blind and reading Braille. She wanted to be challenged.

So she joined a snow skiing group.

Elliott saw a paradigm shift in her -- she went from Erin the blind kid to Erin the skier.

He took his daughter's dramatic attitude change as his inspiration and applied it to the curriculum of scuba diving.

Leaving a six-figure career -- Elliott was instrumental in the startup of CLTV News in Chicago -- he now works seven days a week, getting paid only by teaching diving instruction.

This journey is one where he tries to motivate people, to create a ripple effect in which people are so inspired by his daughter's story that they take on challenges they never have before.

"If we can get individuals with disabilities to be motivated, to be positive, and to take on challenges, then they can't help but motivate and inspire others around them," he says.

Diveheart has injected a new attitude on life into people with disabilities, taking them from special classes into mainstream classes and giving them a sense of determination. If they can scuba dive, Elliott's class suggests, they can do anything.