

Downers Grove-based Diveheart offers scuba diving opportunities for individuals with disabilities

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DOWNERS GROVE – From the basics of cleanliness to soaking in hot tubs to alleviate aches, water has been known to have soothing, healing properties. But for scuba divers at Downers Grove-based Diveheart, water has a much deeper significance.

The nonprofit organization, which does not charge a fee to participants, has scores of volunteers that offer scuba diving instruction and opportunities for children, adults and veterans with disabilities.

The zero gravity of a liquid environment becomes the great equalizer as individuals find freedom when they temporarily lose their wheelchairs, walking aids and prosthetics. But many also find much more than they expected when they rise from the water.

U.S. Army veteran Darrell Young, 59, has been participating with Diveheart since 2006. Young has been a paraplegic since a military vehicle accident injured his spinal cord in 1975.

“Because I am a spinal cord patient, the deeper that I go the more the water pressure is on me and I find relief when I am at a certain depth of water,” Young said. “It seems when I come back to the top it brings out something new in me.”

Young’s reaction is exactly why founder and Downers Grove resident Jim Elliott started Diveheart in 2001.

“I dig the fact it is a fast payoff,” Elliott said. “You get them into the pool and they come out and believe in themselves.”

The journey started in the 1980s when Elliott enrolled his oldest daughter, who was born blind, in skiing lessons.

“It turned her life around,” Elliott said.

An avid skier and diver, he started teaching blind skiers in the 1980s and saw how it was affecting their lives through higher self-esteem and self-confidence. While he continued his day job working as an advertising executive at CLTV, the idea that scuba diving could similarly benefit individuals with disabilities began to take root.

“When the kids were grown and gone, I walked away from a six-figure income to start Diveheart,” Elliott said. “I don’t make a salary, I work seven days a week and I’m not afraid to take out the garbage. And it turned from something I wanted to do to build self-esteem in people with disabilities to now doing PTSD research at Midwestern University.”

Midwestern University physical therapy program director and professor Donna Cech said the occupational therapy and physical therapy students developed a short research survey to determine if diving makes a difference in the daily lives of individuals who are disabled.

“We are still analyzing the data for veterans, but I know that by meeting people, [diving] has been a very profound thing, especially if they have a physical disability,” Cech said.

The university also has done research on children and young adults with autism, age 11 to 28, who have participated in the Diveheart program.

“They feel better about themselves, have increased social participation, feeling of freedom in the water, and scuba diving helped build confidence and have better self-perception,” Cech said.

As Diveheart Military Wounded volunteer team leader for the past three years, Downers Grove firefighter and U.S. Army veteran Quinn Triplett has witnessed what diving accomplishes for wounded veterans.

“As a veteran, it’s really great to interact with some of the WWII vets,” Triplett said. “They love telling stories and they get to talk about their experiences.”

Triplett said in addition to the military camaraderie that is present, the veterans connect on a level outside of being a wounded veteran because they now have diving in common.

“The disability doesn’t matter,” Triplett said. “Because now he’s scuba diving and has the ability to help others.”

As the DMW team leader, Triplett maintains the diving equipment and fills the tanks, putting in about 15 volunteer hours a week. Not surprisingly, it is diving and working with the veterans that he enjoys the most.

“It feels like every time I go to an event I am making a new lifelong friend,” Triplett said. “You are helping to change their life in a positive direction.”

For Young, while he still experiences daily pain, his diving experience has been transforming.

“I think that diving really helps anyone who has a physical condition,” Young said. “Diveheart has the right people there, and all you need to learn to dive is to breathe. I have seen so many quadriplegics dive and come back up and have a great story to tell. We are all the same when we are in the water.”

