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Diveheart provides thrills for disabled

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Sharon Baron / Diveheart

A whole new world: Diveheart members escort Matt Browning, center, who has cerebral palsy, on an underwater tour of Pickles Reef off Key Largo.

Jackie Moore watched her 27-year-old son, Eric, plunge into the ocean off Key Largo on Monday with his dive buddy Pete Murray — and could hardly believe her eyes.

“Look, his legs are moving!” she exclaimed. “I’ve never seen that before.”

On Eric’s first open-water scuba dive, his arm and leg muscles unclenched as his buddies escorted him on an underwater tour of clear, shallow Pickles Reef.

Afflicted with cerebral palsy, Eric spends most of his life in a wheelchair with no use of his arms and legs. But along with three other clients at

Palm Beach Gardens-based Pathways to Independence, he is training to become a certified scuba diver with the nonprofit organization Diveheart.

Eric was thrilled with the experience.

“Awesome. It was tremendous,” he said after returning to the Rainbow Reef dive boat. “It allows me to do things I wouldn’t be able to do on land.”

Which is precisely the idea, according to Murray, a Diveheart volunteer.

“Their entire life, they’ve been labeled ‘disabled,’ ” Murray said. “But now, they are a scuba diver.”

Diveheart — founded in 2001 by Chicago media executive Jim Elliott to train people with all sorts of disabilities to become scuba divers — has expanded its operation to South Florida in the past several years. Wilhelmina “Willie” Stanton, 31, of Lantana — a divemaster, boat captain and six-year Diveheart volunteer — is now the Florida team lead.

Stanton, with help from about 40 regular volunteers, holds “Discover Scuba” events and organizes classes for able-bodied scuba divers to become certified as buddies and instructors for the disabled under the Handicapped Scuba Association. Diveheart is working toward becoming its own certification agency for adaptive diving.

Before taking Moore and three other cerebral palsy patients out in open water, Diveheart

instructors put them through pool training sessions to make them comfortable with scuba tanks, buoyancy compensation devices and full face masks. Stanton said the full face masks, which deliver oxygen continuously instead of on demand, are necessary because the students cannot hold regulators in their mouths.

Moore, along with 59-year-old Donnell Norfus, 21-year-old Alex Knight, and 38-year-old Matt Browning, had to be carried onto the dive boat by their buddies and Rainbow Reef staffers. All but Norfus was accompanied by a parent. Pathways to Independence executive director Sue Buechele stuck close to him.

“He’s never been on a boat,” Buechele said. “This is his first vacation away from his mother.”

En route to Pickles Reef, Stanton conducted a pre-dive briefing with instructors and buddies.

“It’s going to be more of a snorkel dive,” she told the group. “I don’t want to have any trouble with ear-clearing. I’ve set up everybody with full face masks. Fit them on the surface. Go meet your buddy teams and go over hand signals with them. Make sure you don’t leave anyone unattended on the back of the boat.”

The waters at Pickles Reef were clear and calm, but still it took a while to suit everyone up and make sure they were comfortable with dive equipment. Then it was time to submerge.

The four newbie divers spent close to an hour in the water, and Browning was gleeful that he spotted a cruising nurse shark from a distance. He said he wasn’t scared at all.

Knight thoroughly enjoyed her tour and didn’t want to get back on the boat.

“A fantastic opportunity,” said her mom Kristin Knight. “She took to it immediately. It’s great — the two of us. It’s our little trip together.”

Alex’s dive buddy, Julia Grote of Lighthouse Point, had just as much fun.

“To see her from the pool and finally get into the ocean, it was super cool to see her improvement,” Julia, 16, said. “She really loved it.”

Julia said working with Diveheart has inspired her to want to become an instructor.

“I really enjoy diving and helping people out,” she said.