



Navy Veteran Finds Way

A LIFE WITH DIVEHEART FAMILY
POST 9-11-01

Diveheart helped Navy veteran Jesse Kolek find his way. Diveheart, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, provides scuba diving instruction and opportunities for children and adults with disabilities and wounded veterans. Diveheart's office is located in Downers Grove, and the organization has chapters around the world.

Following the events of 9-11-01, Jesse enlisted in the U.S. Navy, where he served as a diver. "My primary duties included experimental, salvage, husbandry, and rescue diving," he said. Jesse was honorably discharged in 2011 due to a service-related disability, and he subsequently struggled to figure out his future. "Diving was all I knew and cared about," he said. "I attempted attending community college but had difficulty focusing and struggled in class. My main desire was to somehow get back into the Navy as a diver. It took a while to realize that wasn't going to happen."

It was through his involvement with an employment program at the local Hines VA Hospital that Jesse connected with Diveheart. In helping identify meaningful civilian employment, Eric Kulesza, the job coach with whom he worked, listened carefully to Jesse's interest and skills. Familiar with Diveheart, Eric approached the organization, sharing Jesse's experience in the Navy, and inquiring about possible employment. "Founder/president Jim Elliott, and executive director Tinamarie Hernandez were receptive to the VA program and carved out a role to help me be part of Diveheart's mission of helping individuals with disabilities through scuba diving. Although I am not performing the same duties as I was in the Navy, I still find meaning being involved in diving."

Jesse began with Diveheart volunteering as an office assistant. He switched to managing equipment and operations, something, he said, he was more "interested and proficient in." The next year, Diveheart secured funding enabling them to hire him part-

time. "My duties consist of organizing and maintaining inventory in the gear locker, which is Diveheart's storage facility. I prepare and stage the equipment for upcoming dive events," Jesse said. "I'm also welcome to participate in local weekend dive events."

Jesse said that working at Diveheart has been good for his mental health. "Other areas of my life have also seemingly improved since I've been there. For example, I now have two beautiful girls and own a home in Bolingbrook with my girlfriend, Heather."

"Jim and Tinamarie have been very understanding of my needs and abilities. They are flexible whenever I have medical appointments or parenting responsibilities, and overall are extremely supportive. I am so glad Diveheart is continuing to expand and benefit more and more people."