



Olson Basks in Power of Scuba



Rick Olson, third from left, wore a full face mask with communication capability in order to speak with instructors and then hand sign to Ericka Remington to his immediate right. The new technique is revolutionary in working with the deaf-blind. *Photo courtesy of Diveheart.*

Illinois Regional Group blinded veteran Rick Olson was one 30 scuba divers who converged on the waters of Cozumel, Mexico, December 2-15.

The trip was arranged and conducted by The Diveheart Foundation, a nonprofit organization based in Downers Grove, Illinois. Its mission is to build confidence and independence in children, adults, and veterans with disabilities through the sport of scuba diving.

For Rick, already a certified totally blind diver, a highlight of the trip was successfully experimenting with a new training technique for blind scuba. Diveheart instructors and Divemasters used ocean reef full-face masks with communications to relay commands to Rick, who also wore a mask and tactually communicated the instructions to Ericka Remington, a totally blind and deaf woman.

"This communication technique had never been done before and could, in the future, allow individuals to scuba dive safely while enjoying and 'seeing' the underwater environment in a unique way," said Diveheart President Jim Elliott . According to Rick, the technique did not come without arduous practice and hard work.

"We worked on the skills test until dark one day and Ericka did very well," he said. "The more we practiced, the easier it became until we began to relax and feel comfortable with the new world in which we found ourselves."

Rick's dives during the trip included one in 65 feet of water onto a sunken, 100-foot-long Coast Guard boat. He also made drift dives in which he was so close to the bottom of the water, and the current so swift, that his hands skimmed through sand.

Rick also experienced aquatic life firsthand, as well as canyons and caves. He could feel the various types of underwater animals and shells. With knowledgeable divers with them, he said, they were able to feel things without the chance of getting hurt.

"It wasn't until we got home that it really dawned on us how lucky we were to have had this experience," he said.

Kandace McCue, Orientation and Mobility Instructor at the Central Blind Rehabilitation Center at Hines, also made the trip.

Diveheart activities in Cozumel were made possible through grants from a variety of sources, including the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs.