

## Water offers freedom of movement

Scuba gives new therapy options for the paralyzed

**By Staff reports**

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Blake Thorne/The Holland Sentinel

Jim Elliott, right, helps Kelly Merz into the shallow end of the pool at Harbor Lights Middle School.

**Holland, MI** — With a heavy scuba tank strapped to his back and goggles over his eyes, Colin Kacmarsky feels free.

“When you’re in the water, it’s like you’re normal,” the 33-year-old said. “I’ve only been paralyzed for six months, so I can vividly remember what it’s like to walk and swim.”

Exploring the deep end of the pool at West Ottawa’s Harbor Lights Middle School, Kacmarsky was helping out with a three-day training seminar which will give local dive instructors at Advance Scuba in Holland the tools to offer educational scuba diving programs to people with disabilities.

Leading that training was Jim Elliott, of Diveheart. Founded in 2001, the Illinois-based non-profit offers this kind of training to dive instructors around the world.

For people with disabilities, including those who’ve lost the use of their legs, scuba diving is incredibly liberating and helps forge a new identity, Elliott said.

"All of a sudden it's Johnny the scuba diver, not Johnny the guy in the wheel chair," Elliott said.

The training will allow Advance Scuba to partner with the Mary Free Bed Rehabilitation Hospital in Grand Rapids to launch an introductory scuba program for people with disabilities in October, said Tim Marr, owner of Advance Scuba.

The program will give people a basic introduction to scuba diving. They'll learn about gear, safety and how to suit up as well as spend time diving in the pool.

After two days training in the pool with Elliott, the Advance team invited some Mary Free Bed therapists, and Kacmarsky, a former Mary Free Bed patient, to don scuba gear, get in the water and check out the program.

"It was a 60-minute pressure relief," said Kelly Merz, a Mary Free Bed therapist who works with adults with spinal cord injuries.

Merz herself had a spinal cord injury and uses a wheelchair. This was her first time experiencing scuba, she said.

"I can not wait to get them (the patients) in the water now," she said. "It's such a freedom to be under water. I was equal to everyone in the water."

Watching Kacmarsky dart to the bottom of the pool, Sue Kurtz immediately started thinking of the people she works with at the Grand Rapids Home for Veterans who would benefit from scuba. Most of the them are used to active lives, she said.

"We're always looking for new opportunities," she said.

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