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COME ON IN, THE WATER'S FINE

Disabled divers getting along swimmingly

For most of his life, Vietnam veteran Rick Olson was too busy working and raising a family to participate in sports. But since losing his sight six years ago, he's taken up bowling, golfing, and skiing as a way to get out of the house. Now, after getting involved with an organization called Diveheart, he's a certified scuba diver.

Diveheart was started in 2001 by Jim Elliott, an experienced diver who had previously worked with blind skiers, including his daughter. He saw how learning to ski boosted her confidence and self-esteem and decided to bring scuba diving to children and adults with disabilities, including paralysis, amputations, and autism.

Elliott, a member of the Rotary Club of Downers Grove, Ill., USA, says scuba diving allows people who struggle on land to experience weightlessness. "Scuba diving is a lot like flying, but instead of being in an airplane, your body *is* an airplane," he says.

Olson loves diving not only for the sense of freedom it gives him but for the "challenge of doing something that a lot of people with vision don't do," he says.

The divers learn scuba skills with help from Diveheart's trained buddy divers. Rotary clubs have donated special equipment such as full face masks for blind, quadriplegic, and cognitively impaired divers. "It's great to do international projects, but to me it's really great to see local and national projects as well," says Kent



Above: Jim Elliott works with Christina Tran, a blind diver, on buoyancy control. Diveheart has a program that allows people who are totally blind and deaf to scuba dive. **Left:** In Australia, Elliott (center) works with a boy who has a spinal injury.

Stop by the Diveheart booth in the House of Friendship at the RI Convention in Montréal, Que., Canada, this month, or visit www.diveheart.com.

Ebersold, past president of the Downers Grove club. "We sometimes forget that there are people right here who need our help."

Diveheart, which has been featured on CNN and in *Money* magazine, takes its more experienced divers on trips to scuba meccas such as Florida and Cozumel, Mexico. Training and trips are funded partly through donations. The Rotary Club of Naperville, Ill.,

recently held a wine dinner and silent auction for Diveheart that raised \$10,000 after a matching donation from the club's foundation. The money will be used to train disabled veterans, says club president Pat Merryweather.

Elliott has trained people in Australia, China, and the Caribbean to start similar programs. He contacts local Rotary clubs to ask for support and to help spread the

word about Diveheart's mission. On a trip to Australia in 2007, a visit to the Rotary Club of Brighton Beach resulted in an A\$20,000 donation to start a local program.

Elliott's dream is to build a facility for training, rehabilitation, and research on the benefits of diving for individuals with disabilities. "Our vision," he says, "is to think big and try to change the world."

— SUSIE O. MA