



Photos by Peter Hoffman / Staff photographer

Mike Letch of Australia is helped into his scuba gear by Jim Elliot, left, and Debbie Dudek of the Diveheart Foundation in Downers Grove. Letch is a paraplegic who received a grant through the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust and is touring the world learning diving skills.

'We're all equal underwater'

Paraplegic scuba diver is making the most of a grant to travel around the world

By **Mike Mitchell**
STAFF WRITER

Even the smallest gifts can have a huge impact on a person's life.

"I've just rediscovered the ocean. It's what I had been missing from my life," said Mike Letch, a paraplegic diver who finished a scuba instructor's course recently with Diveheart Foundation in Downers Grove. "It's been an incredible pastime for (the disabled). You take gravity out (of) the equation."

Letch, who spent six hours training in the pool Oct. 13 at the Doubletree Hotel in Downers Grove, won a travel grant with the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust to travel the world and to take instructor's courses.

Letch, of Melbourne, Australia, said he heard advertisements for the trust on the radio and decided to apply. "It was like winning the lottery," he said. "They put you through a grueling interview process, but I had let them know that I was a passionate person. To my surprise, I won."

The 58-year-old spent most of the weekend practicing scuba techniques under the guidance and direction of



Letch scuba-dives in the pool at the Doubletree Hotel in Downers Grove recently.

Diveheart, a nonprofit organization that educates physically and mentally disabled people about diving.

Letch, who visited Austin, Texas, last week, said he chose Diveheart because it has some of the best methods and techniques for paraplegic divers in the world.

Diveheart founder Jim Elliot said he was surprised that the Australian-born diver chose the organization as part of his tour.

"I mean, we were incredibly honored," Elliot said. "But we've certified a lot of paraplegics and quadriplegics. It's not entirely different

for (paraplegics) once they're in the water. Once they are buoyant, they are very much like someone else. They have web gloves. They may not be as fast as swimmers because they can't use fins, but in many ways they can do just as much."

Debbie Dudek, a Diveheart instructor, said often paraplegics are even more skilled than divers who have full use of their body.

"It's no different teaching someone with a disability, and some of them even have better skills," Dudek said. "I think they have more need and want. So naturally because they've put up with so much, they are more willing to learn."

Elliot said the training can be exhausting for divers. There is a drill in which Letch was asked to wear a blindfold while in the water. On Oct. 14, the group visited the Kankakee River for the open water drills, spending part of the day in 60-degree water.

"We're all equal underwater," Elliot said. "You can tell that Mike was excited. He actually joked with me, saying, 'Oh, I'm going to have to go back on to land now and deal with gravity.'"

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