

## Taking the plunge

### Organization teaches people with disabilities how to scuba dive

September 10, 2009

By WENDY FOSTER For The Sun

She heard scuba diving was like flying, only through the water. Jessica Cox, a 26-year-old resident of Tucson, Ariz., decided to check it out for herself.

Cox, who was born without arms, took her first dives with Diveheart Foundation, the Downers Grove-based not-for-profit organization that provides scuba diving opportunities for individuals with physical and mental disabilities.



**Jessica Cox, a pilot and motivational speaker who was born without arms, waits while someone ties back her hair before she begins a scuba diving lesson at the Holiday Inn Select last month. Members of the Diveheart organization teach people with disabilities how to dive. Jonathan Miano / Staff photographer**

The experience was added to her already long list of firsts. The professional motivational speaker is the first female American pilot to fly operating the controls with her feet and the first person without arms in the American Tae Kwan Do Association to earn black belts. (She has two).

Cox spent a week in Illinois with Diveheart recently, training first at the Holiday Inn Select in Naperville, and then diving at the Haigh Quarry in Kankakee.

"It was a lot of fun," she said. "And there was an 'a ha' moment when you understand buoyancy and how to control it with your own breathing, It was fun to get to that point. This really sparked something in me, to see the beauty of the water."

That reaction also sparks something in Jim Elliott, who founded and operates the Diveheart Foundation. I love what I do," said Elliott, of Downers Grove. "I can't get up early enough or go to bed late enough. I just love this."

For Elliott, it's a labor of pure love as he dives with children and adults with disabilities, as well as trains instructors and diving buddies to do the same all around the world.

Elliott said what started out as a whim instantly became a passion. He began diving "as a total fluke," he said. "But when I dove I thought it was so incredibly cool. Why would people do drugs? There's a natural high from diving."

Elliott started training disabled divers in 1997 and incorporated in 2001. Four years ago, he formed Diveheart Military Wounded to provide diving opportunities for veterans. All Diveheart instructors and diving buddies are volunteers. While working locally, Diveheart uses the pool at Holiday Inn Select in Naperville and Haigh Quarry in Kankakee. Elliott also coordinates diving experiences and instructor training around the world including Florida, Cozumel, the Cayman Islands and Central America.

Elliott is undaunted by the nature and degree of a diver's disability, or age. He works with children, starting at 8, who are visually impaired, paralyzed, have autism, cerebral palsy or almost any other disability.

"All they need to do is breathe and nod their head up and down or from side-to-side" he said.

Pressure-related illnesses and seizure disorders present more of a challenge, but Elliott said in these instances, they just don't dive as deep.

"There are great reefs that are shallow where the light really penetrates and there are fish all over," he said.

Cox said the Diveheart experience has inspired her to someday travel to scuba dive in oceans.

"It was wonderful," she said. "The people with Diveheart have such big hearts. Just the thought that they're doing this, that they're so patient and work so hard, it's so refreshing to know there are so many people out there wanting to help people with disabilities."

Elliott is a firm believer in the powerful impact a sport activity can have on one's self-esteem and confidence. Andrew MacLennan of Naperville is a testament to that. The 26-year-old learned how to scuba dive from Elliott in 2006 and then traveled with him for a weeklong dive experience in the Cayman Islands. When he got back, he shared his excitement with his peers, none of whom had experienced scuba diving.

"I told people about it and they were pretty jealous," MacLennan said. "Other people wanted to try it."

Aside from the excitement of the actual diving, this was the first trip he had taken without his parents. Now he is eager to try other experiences.

"Since then he's been on a cruise with Western DuPage Special Recreation Association," said his mother, Kathy MacLennan. "This showed him that he could do that."

The physical benefits of scuba diving are extensive, especially for people with disabilities, Elliott said. Most importantly, it gives people who are typically sedentary a chance to move.

"This is the only sport in the world that has no gravity, along with all of the benefits that come with that," he said. "Kids can move body parts that they've never been able to move before. Range of motion improves immediately, circulation improves immediately."

Elliott said the pressure aspect of diving is increasingly thought to have benefits, especially to individuals with autism.

Divers are often encouraged by Elliott to view their hobby as a potential vocational opportunity.

"Basically we try to create a passion for diving and then lead them in a direction to apply their new skill, to follow a career path into something they love and allow them to have an income," he said.

Elliott is especially passionate about the veterans who are touched by the Diveheart Military Wounded program.

"They're superman when they go off, and then come back having lost so much -- a fiancée, their home, their job," he said. "Some suffer brain injuries or lose limbs. We get them into the water. We can try to turn them around to see all of the cool things there are in the ocean."

Diveheart works with Hines and other veterans hospitals, and also is providing training at military bases, rehabilitation hospitals and service organizations around the world.

The ultimate goal for Diveheart is to open a world-class facility locally to offer year-round diving opportunities.

"Our motto is no retreat," Elliott said. "We keep going forward with as many activities as possible."

Comment at [thedownersgrovesun.com](http://thedownersgrovesun.com)

**FYI**

For more information about Diveheart, visit [www.diveheart.org](http://www.diveheart.org). For more information about Jessica Cox, visit [www.rightfooted.com](http://www.rightfooted.com).