



Born without arms, woman drives, types, and scuba dives

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Jessica Cox scuba dives in the pool at the Naperville Holiday Inn. Sara Koehnke, left, and Guy Dor help with Jessica's dive vest.

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Jessica Cox, who was born without arms, checks out her dive gear at the Naperville Holiday Inn pool.

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Jessica Cox recently learned to scuba dive with the help of instructors from Downers Grove-based Diveheart.

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Jessica Cox gets some assistance from Andy Ferraro.

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Jessica Cox scuba dives in the pool at the Naperville Holiday Inn.

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Jessica Cox likes to say there's nothing she can't do, only things she hasn't figured out how to do. Yet. It's not a long list.

"I haven't figured out how to put my hair in a ponytail," she says, "and how to rock climb."

Cox, 26, was born without arms. She uses her feet like hands - to drive a car (she has an unrestricted license), to type on a keyboard (25 words per minute), to pump her own gas, even to put in and remove her contact lenses.

Along with those remarkably dexterous feet, she has an athlete's powerful legs and a tightrope walker's sense of balance.

She lives in an apartment with only one modification - barstools next to the bathroom and kitchen sinks. That's where she sits to bring her feet up to arm level, so she can brush her long, dark hair or wash the dinner dishes.

"My father never once shed a tear about my birth condition. He never saw me as a victim, and I never saw myself that way," Cox said. "My mother always said, 'You can do anything you want to do.'"

One of those things she's always wanted to do is learn how to scuba dive. So Cox recently was sitting in a deck chair at the Holiday Inn Select in Naperville, wearing a pink wet suit and assembling scuba equipment with her feet before heading into the pool for a training swim.

"She's unbelievable," marveled Jim Elliott, president and founder of Diveheart, a Downers Grove-based nonprofit that teaches people with disabilities how to scuba dive and snorkel.

Cox, who lives in Arizona, came for a week of Diveheart's specialized training, which is adapted for each individual's needs.

Elliott has worked with people with cerebral palsy, amputees, quadriplegics and people with visual or cognitive impairments, including autism.

"It's the only sport in the world where there's no gravity," Elliott said. "You can get someone out of a wheelchair and put them in the water, and they can move in water the way they can't move on land."

Cox is already a good swimmer, so her training focused on learning to operate the equipment - such as clearing her mask - with her feet. Her buoyancy vest needed to be weighted differently to adjust for a lighter torso because she has no arms. Another challenge is diving without fins so her feet are free to control her equipment.

After mastering those skills, she completed open water dives in the Kankakee quarry Diveheart uses for training. Her certification will allow her to dive anywhere she wants as long as she is accompanied by two diving buddies.

Cox is planning to dive in Hawaii this fall on a family trip given to her by producers after her appearance on "The Ellen DeGeneres Show." Elliott has also invited her to join other disabled divers on a Diveheart trip to Cozumel in December and is looking for a sponsor.

Learning how to scuba dive is not the first accomplishment to land Cox in the spotlight - and maybe not even the most impressive.

Cox is the first person in aviation history to be certified to fly a light plane with her feet, and she is working on becoming a flight instructor. Just before coming to Naperville to work with Diveheart, she spent a week in Oshkosh, Wis., as a guest speaker at AirVenture, the nation's largest aviation convention.

She is first armless person to earn a black belt from the American Tae Kwon-Do Association.

And getting an unrestricted driver's license - she drives a regular, automatic-transmission car, steering with her right foot and braking and accelerating with her left - is a huge accomplishment that gives her the freedom to rent a car on her own anywhere she travels.

It's not about proving anything, she says. "It's about doing what you really want to do."

Wearing prosthetic arms would cut down on the stares she gets, but she stopped when she was in eighth grade. It just seemed so much more natural - and easier - to do things with her feet.

Now Cox, who has a psychology degree from the University of Arizona, sometimes uses those "fake arms" as a metaphor in the motivational speeches she gives to corporations, schools and other groups.

She flings them aside during a corporate keynote on the theme of "Disarming the Impossible." For younger audiences, she talks about accepting ourselves and others.

She lives that message.

"I actually enjoy it (being different), as opposed to when I was younger," Cox says. "You realize, after a while, that the difference that sets you apart is what you end up celebrating."

Diveheart Foundation

What: The nonprofit organization provides scuba diving and snorkeling lessons to any physically impaired child or adult. The goal is to give participants the joy of "flying" through the water, encourage confidence and independence and even open up career opportunities for the disabled in areas such as marine biology and coral reef restoration.

Where: Diveheart is based in Downers Grove, but runs programs around the world. Locally, the group has worked with clients of the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, Shriners Hospital for Children and Edward Hines Jr. VA Hospital. The organization takes disabled divers to reefs in the Florida Keys and Cozumel.

How: Training and equipment are adapted to each individual. For example, visually impaired divers wear a mask with a headset inside so the dive instructor can direct them using clock references.

Long-term goal: To build a diving facility for people with disabilities in the Chicago area that would draw participants from around the world.

Fundraising: Diveheart's Fourth Annual Golf Outing is Sept. 23 at The Links at Carillon in Plainfield. The \$125 donation includes 18-holes of golf with a cart and dinner. For registration details or information about volunteering with Diveheart, visit www.diveheart.org.

Jessica Cox

To learn more: Visit www.rightfooted.com for information on Cox as a motivational speaker, as well as videos and photos from her childhood and her daily life as an adult and some of her writings.