



Child's Wish: dreams come true for disabled, terminally ill kids

Continued from page 5B fishing, and his wish was to go deep-sea fishing. At first, it didn't appear that the weather would cooperate for the trip.

"If you didn't believe in God, you would have believed in Him that day," Cranford said. "It rained 17 inches in two days right before he came on his trip. I asked them if we had to go, and they said 'yes' because he was terminally."

Cranford said what happened next was amazing. "It rained—and I'm talking about rain," Cranford recalled. "I put the boat in the water, and Noah was sitting in the car, waiting until the last minute. Just as soon as I got the boat in the water and told him it was okay to come to the boat, the rain stopped."

On that trip, Noah desperately wanted to venture into the ocean, but the water was just too choppy. Cranford began cruising the Intracoastal Waterway, and as he slowed down, his depth-finder lit up indicating fish in the area.

"I said, 'OK, we're fishing right here,' and I don't do inshore fishing. I do offshore fishing," Cranford explained.

He anchored the boat, and the wind stopped blowing and the sun finally broke free from the clouds.

"And Noah looked at me and said, 'This is where God wants me to be,' and it killed me," Cranford recalled Friday.

Though it's seven years since, the memory still brings tears to Cranford's eyes. Noah's mother Kelly Mayberry attended the event Friday, which Cranford noted was in Noah's memory. Kelly described Noah as a "fish-a-holic."

"Even when he was neutropenic, he would fish with gloves," she recalled.

Kelly said she is grateful for U.S.S.A. Child's Wish program and to Cranford for spending his time with Noah.

"It definitely made his time in the hospital and everything so much better," Kelly tearfully recalled.

Cranford admits that he probably grew "too attached"



to Noah. After their fishing trip, he began visiting him in the hospital and kept in touch with him. Kelly recalled that Cranford gifted Noah with a tackle box, and while other kids took video game systems to occupy them during chemo treatments, Noah took his tackle box.

Noah passed away in 2011. Tugwell can still recall the day that Cranford called him and told him that Noah had passed away.

"I knew all about Noah," Tugwell said. "I had never met him, but I knew all about him."

Though Tugwell and Cranford have known each other for many years, they haven't always been friends. They had always faced off as competitors in fishing tournaments.

"I couldn't stand him," Tugwell said, pointing to Cranford and laughing. "I thought he was the most arrogant man I'd ever met."

Cranford said the feeling was mutual. "The men say through U.S.S.A., they've become close friends. Tugwell said after one of his Child's Wish participants died last year, he reached out to Cranford for support.



It was a boy from West Virginia, and Tugwell took him on his first bear hunt.

"He got his bear the first day," he recalled. "I never got contact with him. I kept calling him and talking to him on the phone. Then one day he didn't answer."

He immediately called the boy's father and learned that he had passed away.

"I called John (Cranford). That one messed me up bad," Tugwell said. "I almost quit doing this because of that. It just hurt so bad."

"But then, I look back at what happened here today, and there's no way I could give it up. I love it."

For the 33 children and their families who participated in the U.S.S.A. event last Friday, it was the experience of a lifetime.

One of the children who participated was 11-year-old Leah Starnes of Pivrony, North Carolina. Starnes said she loves fishing and often goes fishing in Lake Waccamaw and the Waccamaw River. But she enjoyed getting to go offshore.

"We went out and tried five different places," Leah said. "The one thing I came for was to

catch a shark, and I did that. My patty-pan caught a ribbon fish, and the man on the boat caught some little ol' fish the size of bread, but they're real shiny."

On one occasion, Leah reeled in her line to find a blue crab hanging from it.

"He was just hanging out on my shrimp, and he wouldn't let go," she said. "So, I shook the line and he dropped back down into the water."

Leah said the thing she likes about fishing is that it's relaxing. She actually came to the first U.S.S.A. event in Southport last year, and some others returned this year. She also knows some of the children from the UNC Children's Hospital in Chapel Hill. She explained that where she goes for treatment of her leukemia.

"I love my doctor there," Starnes said. "She's tiny but mighty."

Starnes said currently she returns to the hospital every two months. In March of next year, she hopes those visits will decrease to once every six months. Starnes looks forward to the day her doctors tell her that she's in remission.

"After 10 years is up, they'll declare me in remission and say there's no more cancer there," she said.

Hunter Wise, an 11-year-old boy from Wake Forest, also enjoyed a day on the water with his family. Hunter said they came in with quite a haul—31 fish, to be exact.

And that's not including the ones we throw back," he said.

His mother Corrine said that the family doesn't get to fish too often, and she was grateful for the day.

"This was absolutely the best experience because it turned out to be the most beautiful day, and it gave everybody an opportunity to fish," she said.

Steve Craven, who lives in High Point but owns a home on Oak Island, was one of the captains who volunteered his boat Friday.

"This is a great thing," Craven said. "These kids deserve this. They don't deserve what they're getting otherwise."

He said one of his passengers was a 10-year-old girl who loved riding across the waves. "She would just squeal because she was so excited, and I just loved that," he said.

Participants, including Leah and Hunter, and their families arrived Thursday night. The Comfort Suites donated rooms for the night.

Kathy Scheflen, a member of the Southport Lions Club, explained that the club volunteered to host a pizza party for the families and the boat captains at the hotel Thursday night so they could get to know each other.

Scheflen said that the Lions became involved after U.S.S.A. founder and CEO Bridget O'Donoghue, who is involved with the Lions at her home in Wisconsin, contacted them.

Scheflen and her fellow Lions agreed it was a worthy cause and stepped up to help.

In addition to helping with the pizza party, Scheflen said she and other members of the Southport Lions Club made fish-shaped sugar cookies for the

children and about 100 sand-wiches for the families and the boat captains.

They also helped get volunteers from the community. Terry Cough of Terry's Bar-B-Que volunteered to provide hot dogs and hamburgers for the group. He explained that he has a special needs daughter and wanted to volunteer because the issue of ill and disabled children is a cause close to his heart.

"It's just sad that people have to go through things like this in families," he said. "I just want them to have a good day, and it looks like they have."

Scheflen also wanted to make this event bigger than the last,

"These kids deserve this. They don't deserve what they're getting otherwise."

Steve Craven
Volunteer captain

and she enlisted the help of local clowns Grace and The Toe to do face-painting and make balloon animals for the children during lunch.

But she doesn't want to stop there. Scheflen is already planning for next year's event, and she wants to make it even better than this year's.

"The Southport event is a vessel of opportunity for the children and their families to go fishing to forget and enjoy the wonders of being on the water and away from the hospital visits and burden of medical bills," she said.

Those interested in sponsoring or donating to the U.S.S.A. children's event in Southport next year may contact Scheflen at 703-283-1173.

