A child’s wild wish

By Nathan Solheim

Donny and Missy Willis used to have an autumn ritual. They’d polish their rifles, dust off their tent, load the car and head out on their annual hunting trip to the majesties of northwestern Colorado. Every year, they’d have to tell Missy’s son, Jeremy Ledbetter, he’d have to stay home. And every year, he’d tell his mom he was going to go hunting some day, no matter what. It was as predictable as the aspens turning yellow in the fall.

Missy Willis hated to leave her son at home, but she couldn’t risk it. Ledbetter has a rare terminal illness—mitochondrial intestinal neurogastric encephalopathy—that makes outdoor adventure almost impossible. His condition requires a near-constant hook-up to a central line, he needs a ventilator to sleep, and when the 18-year-old isn’t in pain (he must take morphine every four hours), he’s suffering from fatigue. He’s had more than 100 surgeries.

But last fall, Gene Schoonveld (BSBA ’60) helped Ledbetter break the routine.

Schoonveld serves on the board of directors of Child’s Wish—a charity affiliated with the United Special Sportsman Alliance—which connects terminally ill children with guides, landowners or game ranches willing to donate hunting or fishing excursions.

“For some reason, they have a real interest in going hunting,” Schoonveld says of the kids the charity serves. “I don’t question it at all. You just try to get an idea of their physical limitations and do everything possible to make their wish come true.”

When Schoonveld got Ledbetter’s request, he visited him at home in Loveland, Colo., assessed his needs and started putting together plans for a deer hunt. Mike McQuay of Antlers Extreme Outfitters in Craig, Colo., donated a mule deer hunt, and Schoonveld altered one of his own rifles so Ledbetter could shoot it. He even arranged for the young man to take his hunter’s safety courses at home.

In the process, the two developed a close bond.

“He was like an adopted grandfather to Jeremy,” Missy Willis recalls.

That’s nothing unusual for Schoonveld; the 71-year-old Fort Collins resident has three children and six grandchildren and, like a lot of grandfathers, he’s spent a lifetime in the woods. He started hunting birds during his youth in southern Illinois and continued hunting big game during his teens in Colorado.

While attending DU, he even skipped a few classes to go deer hunting, thinking no one would notice. He apparently didn’t know legendary business law professor JJ Johnston well enough: “In the next class, he called me on it,” Schoonveld laughs.

In those days, the College of Business was downtown, and Schoonveld did double duty as a student and aircraft mechanic for United Airlines and the old Frontier Airlines.

Schoonveld joined the Navy after graduation, spending two years as an officer aboard the aircraft carrier USS Yorktown and two years ashore at the Fleet Operations Control Center in Hawaii.

After his discharge, Schoonveld used his DU degree to land a job as a district manager for General Motors in northern Alberta, Canada.

Though he had no trouble finding a job, Schoonveld never lost interest in hunting or biology, so after four years in the frozen North, he enrolled at Colorado State University and earned a master’s degree in animal physiology and nutrition.

Schoonveld then took a job as a wildlife research biologist with the Colorado Division of Wildlife. During his 32 years with the agency, he worked with many of the state’s wildlife species and was responsible for reintroducing moose to the state.

After retirement in 2003, Schoonveld got involved with Child’s Wish while consulting for Bio-Tec Research, a Wisconsin-based wildlife feed producer closely associated with the charity. As the charity’s point man in the West, he’s organized 15 hunting trips for kids from across the country.

“Gene is an asset in many aspects to our charity,” says Brigid O’Donoghue, Bio-Tec CEO and Child’s Wish founder. “Along with his background in conservation and natural resources, he is very devoted to the children.”

Schoonveld accompanies the kids through their entire trip, helping them travel across challenging terrain, seeing to their comfort and making sure their medical needs are met. One fall day a few years ago, he found himself asking permission from an Inuit tribe in Alaska for four of his kids to hunt black bear on their lands. A few days later, he helped drag a bear out of the swampy Alaskan muskeg. Over the years, he’s also taken kids elk hunting in Colorado and whitetail deer hunting in Oklahoma.
Schoonveld takes care to educate the children as much as possible. On hunts, he’ll tell them about the biology of the animal they’re hunting as well as its habitat. He also instructs the teens on gun safety and how to properly dress an animal after the kill. He’s even arranged to have animals mounted by taxidermists who donate their time and skill.

On last year’s trip with Ledbetter, McQuay spotted a nice mule deer. Ledbetter did his best to crawl through the sagebrush and cactus with McQuay’s help. When they were close enough, Ledbetter popped up, took a shot ... and missed.

They moved closer. The next shot found its mark, and the youngster had his first mule deer. It was a Western four-pointer, which means it had eight total points in its rack.

Schoonveld had gone to fetch lunch for the group when he heard the shots.

“Gene’s a pretty cool guy; he doesn’t say a whole lot. But when he found out [Jeremy] got one, he was very emotional,” McQuay remembers. “He said it was probably the toughest hunt he’d ever been on.”

For Ledbetter, bagging the deer was a dream come true. For Schoonveld, it was a successful hunt for a kid who really needed it. For all the children he helps, Schoonveld’s trips are the thrill of a lifetime. And for most, it’s their last.

“It’s very demanding and emotionally draining, but it’s also very rewarding, especially when they’ve been successful,” Schoonveld says. “It can also be very difficult when the hunt is over and you put them on the plane knowing this is their last hunting trip, and in all probability, it’s the last time you’ll see them.”

Ledbetter, though, is still hanging on and already talking about his next hunt and a new fall ritual.

“After I got home last year and we all talked about how much fun it was, we started talking about going again,” Ledbetter says. “We’re going for antelope this year.”

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