Making wishes come true

Alliance helps critically ill youngsters fulfill their longings for outdoor adventure

By MICHAEL BABCOCK
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Like a lot of 12-year-old Montanans, Hunter Gervais wanted to shoot a deer. The wish came true this fall for the young cancer survivor through the efforts of the United Special Sportsman Alliance or USSA, a Wisconsin-based "child wish" organization.

"He shot a six-point mule deer on opening day — Oct. 23 — at the Gardner Ranch in Broadus," said his mother, Amanda Gervais. "It was a life changing thing."

Gervais, the son of Amanda and Brett Gervais of Great Falls and a student at North Middle School, has battled cancer since he was a toddler. When he was 3 years old, he was diagnosed with Rhabdomyosarcoma and has endured 42 weeks of chemotherapy and 20 days of radiation. He has been in remission for eight years.

"It was very special, a once in a lifetime thing," Hunter said. "We saw at least 50 deer. We saw a few other bucks. This one is a seven-by-six muley. He is going to be mounted for me."

"It made me feel very very special," he said.

Hunter is part of a growing list of youngsters who have been granted a hunting wish — more than 6,400 — since the USSA program began 10 years ago.

And there are others in Montana, Ilka Endrina of Kevin and Kalin Carter of Great Falls, for example.

In 2004, Ilka Endrina of Kevin, the son of Betty and Bill Cole, hunted in Texas where he shot a trophy whitetail buck and a javelina.

"Man what a good time that was," said Bill Cole. "Ilka got to shoot a javelina and a 142-inch Boone and Crockett buck. He had the time of his life down there."

Ilka goes to Sunburst North Toole County High School and recently obtained his driver’s license.

Need some help? Want to help?

- Learn more about United Special Sportsman Alliance youth hunting program on line at www.childswish.com.

And Kalin Carter of Great Falls, shot a beautiful 5-by-5 mule deer buck while hunting with Gardner Ranch Outfitters near Broadus.

"He got it the first day," said his mother, Julene. "There were some hunters from Pennsylvania and they were teasing him about it. One of them said he had been hunting days and hadn't seen anything that nice and then Kalin goes out and shoots it the first morning."

Kalin, who has adult leukemia, is in remission but he has other related health issues. He is a student at CM Russell High School.

Snowball's momentum

United Special Sportsman Alliance, Inc. is a non-profit “dream wish” granting charity, that specializes in sending critically ill and disabled youth and disabled veterans on the outdoor adventure of their dreams. The organization relies solely on volunteerism and has staff in 35

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states and it offers all kinds of hunting, outdoor activities and water sports.

"Nothing means more to me than granting wishes to these kids," said Brigid O'Donoghue, the chief executive officer and founder of USSA. "When you have been sick like I have you understand it. When you overcome something, to know that something is waiting for you outside of the hospital, it takes your breath away."

O'Donoghue survived surgery for epilepsy and a brain tumor when she was a child.

She is a successful business woman in Wisconsin and says USSA just sort of happened.

"With the very first wish I granted, I had no idea it would come to this," O'Donoghue said. "It was like a big snowball rolling down the hill and it kept getting bigger and bigger."

USSA celebrated a decade of granting wishes in October.

"We started out by granting one wish to a dying man in Texas," she said.

"I was thinking of how important it is that we get the animal mounted for each kid," she said.

"I asked, 'how can I find taxidermists to get mounts for my kids.' So I heard the Minnesota taxidermists convention was coming up."

After asking for just a few moments to speak, O'Donoghue wound up being the featured speaker at that convention and soon was sought after by taxidermist associations all over the nation.

"It got up on taxidermy.net forum. That is how Paul Klar came in," she said.

She agrees to speak for each taxidermy organization on the condition that she may take a child hunter with her. She has never been turned down yet.

A Montana Taxidermy Association volunteer mounted the trophy buck for Ikika Endrina.

"And what a nice mount it is," said Will Cole.

"The whole thing means a lot, especially to me," Cole said. "He was too young to get going outdoors."

"He couldn't hike or anything. He was handicapped from the treatments."

"He couldn't hike much over half a mile."

"But it was neat to get to go and see his first hunt. Ikika was smiling from ear to ear."

"And that deer has been on the wall forever. He always looks at that," Cole said.

Returning the favor

With their wish granted, the young people sometimes have to return the favor.

"I stay in touch with them," O'Donoghue said. "I am building a junior board."

"I want these children to mentor other children. I tell them to hang in there and that I am going to call on them to take another child hunting or fishing and they are doing it all over the U.S., so it is really working."

"There are a lot of wonderful children in Montana battling life-threatening illnesses," she said. "Children say they get depressed because of treatments and not being able to do the things that other kids can."

"I tell their parents that they need to get out of the house, to feel the wind in their hair and to feel the sunshine on them."

And Hunter Gervais? He says he plans on living up to his first name.

"Dad didn't really hunt until I got into it. I believe he will go hunting with me next year," Hunter said.

"We have tried explaining to Hunter that this hunt was not what typical hunting is like and that sometimes you hike and look for hours without even finding anything," said his mother, Amanda.

"I have no doubt that he will prove us all wrong and kill something every year now.

"I think he has the hunting bug," she added.

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