House Bill (HB) 1718 was filed to allow the Executive Director of Texas Parks and Wildlife Dept. (TPWD) to lower, to the resident level, the hunting fees of out-of-state terminally ill individuals who come to Texas to hunt through a charity.

Last January Brigid O'Donoghue, CEO and Founder of the United Special Sportsmen Alliance, a 100% volunteer driven 501(c) (3) non-profit national wish granting charity that specializes in sending critically ill and disabled youth and disabled veterans on the outdoor adventure of their dreams, called me to help her find a hunt for a terminally ill cancer patient. During our conversation she informed me that she had to pay a $315 hunting license fee for this person, which would make it more difficult for her charity to sponsor a loved one to accompany the terminally ill huntress.

Our deepest gratitude goes to Corey Howell who was the hero behind the bill’s progress; EWA and TDA for their support; TPWD for their generous consent; Chairman Guillen for authoring the bill, Chairman Estes for sponsoring it. Chairman Fraser to be so attentive to our needs at the hearing, and to the Supreme Legislator to bring it all together.
TPWD was unable to lower the fees because they did not have the statutory authority to do so, and the law could be amended only legislatively. A resident license fee is $25.

I have been volunteering for a few years for the Exotic Wildlife Association (EWA) to represent us at the legislature. I explained to her that I certainly was not a pro and I have never filed a bill (nor have I even thought to do such a thing), but I would try if she were interested in amending the law. She said she was.

The EWA Board of Directors voted unanimously to sponsor the legislation if I could file it. Next, Brigid and I also sought the Texas Deer Association’s support and blessing. Gladly, we obtained that one, too.

With letters of support by both associations I talked to Corey Howell, the director of the House Committee of Culture, Recreation, and Tourism (CRT). Corey and his assistant Lucia Mendez took the matter to heart and directed me to talk with Lacie Petersen and David Sinclair of TPWD. I asked them if the Department would have a problem waiving the hunting fees for those terminally ill hunters of any age coming from other states. I told them that these were beneficiaries of a charity and they would qualify only if they were terminally ill and would not have the money to afford a hunt. The ranchers donate the animals, lodging and meals, and guiding services. The taxidermists donate the mount. The charity donates the travel expenses and puts the hunter in contact with the rancher. We thought that would not be too much to ask the State of Texas to waive the fees.

David Sinclair was concerned that by completely waiving the fees we would do an injustice to those terminally ill who are residents of the state. He had other concerns as well and needed to talk to the executive director of the agency, Carter Smith. I agreed with his concerns and I offered to simply lower the fees to the same amount of those of resident hunters rather than waiving them altogether if he could work out the rest.

A couple of weeks later we were able to file the bill in the House: HB 1718, or the Charity bill as I had initially called it, was born, authored by CRT referral, on March 13, 2013, the bill was heard by the House CTR committee. It was a sober moment that left no one in the room with dry eyes.

Mike Arena shared with the committee how he met Brigid, who invited him and his friend Mike Griffey, who was losing his battle with pancreatic cancer. Brigid invited the two men at her own expense to hunt. He remembered how the disease affected his friend who, sitting by Brigid, exhausted, leaned his head on Brigid’s shoulder, a tear coming down his cheek. USSA was born right

“...invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind and you will be blessed.”

Committee Chairman Ryan Guillen.

Corey was crucial in assisting me step by step through the whole process. He asked me to start gathering witnesses to testify at the hearing, which would come up within one or two weeks after the bill would be referred to committee. I called Brigid, and she put me in contact with six men who have at heart her charity and actively volunteer for it. They are Mike Arena, whose friend was the first recipient of a hunt donated by Brigid herself thirteen years ago and the inspiration for the charity, Brian Trussell, whose son died of cancer in 2011 and was the recipient of two hunts, and TDA member and EWA director John Hopkins; EWA and TDA members Brent Geistweidt, and Bob and Rene’ Samson.

As promised, two weeks after then and there in Brigid’s heart.

Mike concluded his testimony by citing the Scriptures from Luke 14:12-14 “Then Jesus said to his host, ‘When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.’”

Brian Trussell, who could not make it that day, wrote a letter that I read on his behalf. In part it said “My son’s name was Brennan Trussell who was an avid hunter and fisherman... He underwent almost two years of treatment for this cancer before losing his battle on January 30, 2011. Brennan was
given two hunts free of charge by Brent Geisweit of Doss, Texas. I wanted everyone to know that these two hunts
helped Brennan live longer and gave the family more quality time with him. I have since then taken two children on hunts on my ranches that were facing the same possible endings that Brennan was. I got to see the enjoyment that they got to share at the ends of their journey here on earth.” He concluded by saying “My last memories of Brennan will be cherished till I see him again.”

John Hopkins wrote “If you are ever involved in donated hunts to wounded veterans or for those who are terminally ill, you will shed a tear sometime during the event. To bring some happiness into a tragic situation stirs up emotions that I can’t adequately describe.”

Brent Geisweit shared the first time he offered a hunt to a terminally ill child. It was a 6 year old kid who was dying after two years of cancer treatment. Brent testified that he was extremely nervous to make all his dreams come true. That child was the greatest blessing his family ever had. From that time on he and his family have helped many other terminally ill hunters and he ministers them as well.

Many come to faith. He still to this day cannot answer the chilly question of “why me?” but he tells his guests that he is confident that God Himself will answer it one day. He concluded by saying that some of those kids who come to him have broken families or are abandoned by one or both parents who cannot deal with their conditions. The donated hunts restore their courage, which in turn inspires his family.

Chairman Guilleen called Bob Samson next. He told of a hunt he recently offered to a young woman from North Carolina suffering from stage-four cancer. She came with her dad and for 72 hours they never spoke of the disease nor of hospitals, but only of having a grand hunt. Her wish before leaving this world was to go to South Texas and hunt a Texas buck. He also recalled how a fifteen year old on his wheelchair once grabbed him by the arm and asked him “Bob, after this hunt, can we still be friends?” “It tears you up,” Bob added, and then he wrapped up his testimony by saying “[This bill] is not a big deal. It is a little deal. But it is a big deal to these people and the way these hunts affect them.”

The bills were voted unanimously out of committee and then out of the House. In the Senate, Sen. Estes sponsored it and it was referred to Senate Natural Resources. This time Brigid herself flew in to testify and Bob Samson and his brother Rene’ also came.

For the Senate hearing everything that could go wrong went wrong. It started the day before when Brigid lost not one but two planes to mechanical failure. If that was not enough, her suitcase managed to get on a plane by itself and fly to Denver, CO. The third plane finally left Minneapolis the very morning of the hearing with an hour delay, enough to almost let her miss the connection in Chicago (where the door of the plane closed behind her back). In the same morning I left the ranch for the 55 miles drive to Austin before 6 AM with a fog so thick I could not see the hood of my truck. I prayed, no, I demanded God to please let the fog go. I reminded Him miracles were His department, not ours. Our job was to get there and testify on His bill, and all we got was two broken planes, one delayed, a suitcase off on its own, and a fog that you could cut with a knife (and in Lee County the rare times we have fog it never lifts before 8:30-9 AM.)

Then, miraculously, once on the highway the fog lifted up just enough for me to be able to drive through it. I arrived safely at the Capitol a little after 8 AM. The hearing was scheduled to start at 9 AM. By Divine Providence, the flight from Chicago landed at 10:30, fifteen minutes earlier than expected, and a fast cab
driver drove 50 MPH through town, with no accident and no cops, literally catapulting Brigid into the Capitol. I met her at the elevators, grabbed her by the arm and rushed her through the building, hearing her screaming to a man she was talking to “I do not need you anymore, I need her!!” and I delivered her in the hearing room, in her jeans, polo shirt, and tennis shoes, just seconds before the Chairman of Natural Resources called HB 1718. It was 10:53 AM. The hearing would have been adjourned at 11 AM.

And like Paul Harvey used to say, now you know the rest of the story. The bill passed the Senate and landed on the Governor’s desk.

It has been an amazing journey. Now children and adults who face the unthinkable can count on Brigid O’Donoghue and her charity, or other charities like hers, to be able to fly in with them, on the last adventure in this world, their mom, or their dad, or their spouse thanks to the support of total strangers who worked to reduce hunting fees. Two legislators and their staff, one agency, two associations, and a few ranchers who donate time and money to help these families came together and made a difference. All this under the watchful eye of our loving God Who certainly directed the whole process.

HB 1718, aka God’s bill, like I had finally named it, will become law at the stroke of Gov. Perry’s pen and it will be effective on September 1, 2013. It will be called the Mike Griffey Law, in honor of the man who was the first recipient and inspired the creation of the United Special Sportsmen Alliance thirteen greatest Teacher mankind will ever know and may it continue to receive many Blessings for its wisdom!

Epilogue: During the Senate hearing Brigid showed the committee some pictures of hunters, one of which was of Mark. Mark lost his life the day I wrote this article. His brother called

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years ago. USA has since granted 8500 wishes, more wishes than any other outdoor charity.

After the bill passed the Senate, Brigid wrote “This is truly a great day for the state of Texas for they have chosen to set the pace in being the first to enact this compassionate law. In the Gospel of Matthew 25 vs.40 Jesus said ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me!’ I am pleased to say Texas has passed the test given by the Brigid with the sad news. When she told him how she spoke about his brother and showed his picture (blown up in an 8 X 10) before the Texas Senate his mood changed dramatically and was ecstatic. He said his brother would be so proud to know he was part of the bill ... She told him Mark is in Heaven and he knows all about it! He let her go so he could call his family and share the good news. This is what it is all about. The Griffey Law lifted someone’s morale even before becoming law.

To see the House hearing, please go www.capitol.state.ts.us on the right, Broadcast, House, 83rd Legislature, Culture recreation, and Tourism, 3/13/13 or go to http://www.house.state.tx.us/video-audio/committee-broadcasts/committee-archives/player/?session=83&committee=430&ram=13031314430

To see the Senate Hearing, please go to www.capitol.state.tx.us on the right, broadcast, 2013, April 30, Natural Resources (Part 1) or go to http://www.senate.state.tx.us/avarchive/rav.php?ram=00006019

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