A special day with special needs kids

by Barry Feathering

Rend Lake, Illinois was the site of the Second Annual United Special Sportsman Alliance Kid's Fishing Day. A group of fifteen anglers came from all across the country to spend a day taking chronically or terminally ill kids fishing.

The kids along with siblings and parents came to Rend Lake Resort on Sunday evening. On Monday morning after a big breakfast each child was presented with a brand new rod and reel courtesy of Bass Pro Shops. Along with their rod and reel they received a goodie bag with a t-shirt from Coca Cola and a hat from Bass Pro Shops, along with baits of all kinds. The kids also received some tackle from God's Speed Tackle Company. God's Speed Tackle is a new company dedicated to serving Jesus, each lure is named after a scripture from the bible.

All the kids and parent(s) were paired up with an angler and the challenge was set forth to see who could bring in the biggest fish, the heaviest creel and the anglers even had a money pot going that their kid would be the winner of the biggest creel. There were no size limits or limited to any particular species of fish.

The morning was spent with all kinds of new adventures for these children.

One young lady upon catching her first fish was informed that she had to kiss it. Reluctantly she followed the time-honored tradition and kissed the fish. It was reported that the young lady had the biggest smile on her face that her mother had ever seen.

At the scales there was extreme excitement as one young man who had not caught any fish got to hold a fish for the first time. You can bet he will not soon forget the experience.

After a lunch break it was back on the water and more fishing. At the highway 154 bridge on the main lake the kids were catching little stripers as fast as hooks could be baited. Some of the younger children found that a nap was in order as well as some of the parents. It had been an exciting day.

The anglers spent their time with the kids making it a memory that will not soon be forgotten by either the kids or by the anglers. Justin Mitchell is one young man who enjoyed driving the boat more than fishing. Troy Jens (Angling Alabama) could not get him to kiss the fish. You never saw Justin without that great smile on his face.

Along with the fishing there was time spent sharing personal life stories and experiences that will remain unforgettable long after the day on Rend Lake was over. The young lady (Shannon Flarinner) that I had with me along with her dad had been through over 100 weeks of chemotherapy. Later her mother emailed me a picture of her from when she first started treatment. Her head was shaved as she had donated her long beautiful hair to be made into wigs for cancer patients. Shannon now is in remission and if you didn't know her story you'd think she was never ill a day in her life.

On Tuesday morning it was time to bid farewell to new found friends and pray that they will be back next year for another unforgettable time. This was the hardest thing to do the entire time spent with the kids. Each person left Rend Lake touched by the wondrous time spent. The work that Brigid O'Donoghue (and her crew) of United Special Sportsman Alliance does putting on this event in surrendering to do God's work is truly a blessing to all.

The United Special Sportsman Alliance (USSA) is an all volunteer 501(c)(3) national Christian charity. For more information, call (800)518-8019, or log onto (www.childswish.com/).

Justin Mitchell from Tennessee, left, driving the boat with Mr. & Mrs. Troy Jens. Troy is a professional Bass fisherman from Alabama.