Ailing children read

BY JIM LEE
FOR THE WAUSAU DAILY HERALD

PITTSVILLE — Brigid O’Donoghue doesn’t know what it means to give up or to be turned down.

Those attributes say a lot about how hunters and anglers as well as the 41-year-old Pittsville single mother of two teenagers.

Since 2000, O’Donoghue has made a commitment to fulfilling the hunting, fishing or outdoor adventure dreams of seriously disabled children.

“I think we all have a calling in life,” she says.

Following establishment of the United Special Sportsmen Alliance, an all-volunteer team of individuals and corporate sponsors, O’Donoghue has been able to send more than 2,100 people on their dream trips in the past five years.

“This year our goal is to send more than 1,500 youngsters on these trips — a lofty mission to be sure — but one I truly believe we can achieve,” she said.

When O’Donoghue believes, others are quick to share her faith.

In early October the Alliance provided deer hunts for 10 Wisconsin youngsters on private lands in Shawano and Marathon counties. Participants had a variety of illnesses, including heart, lung, brain and sight problems as well as cancer, cerebral palsy and spina bifida.

The hunts were approved by the Department of Natural Resources, which provided safety training and waived normal license requirements, giving “these young hopefuls their first opportunity to enjoy the blessings of a frosty morning in a deer stand with a qualified mentor,” O’Donoghue said.

“I have every confidence a deep appreciation for the whitetail deer will be instilled in these youngsters as well as a desire to participate in hunting as long as time will allow.”

Just how O’Donoghue, a non-hunter raised in Milwaukee, came to shepherd this flock of the disabled and terminally ill is just as amazing as the unexpected assistance she has encountered.

“I connect with these people in a way that’s really unique,” she said of her mentally and physically challenged charges. “I have experienced their pain. I know what they are going through. I can smell a hospital a mile away. I have been down that road.”

After helping raise — and bonding with — a brother who was physically and mentally disabled, “I had brain surgery (for viral encephalitis) when I was 20, which left me speech impaired,” she said.

An abusive marriage followed.

“It was one thing after another,” she says. “It’s been tough, but I made it.”

Looking for a livelihood, she secured a state grant and started her own company — Bio-Tech Research — which produces feed for pen-raised deer. It is that connection to deer farmers that provided the foundation for her early success.

O’Donoghue took on her first project at the urging of a deer farmer who wanted to provide the use of his facility for a “dream hunt” but didn’t know how to locate a recipient. She found a terminally ill man in Texas with a wish to experience deer hunting.

“It changed my life,” O’Donoghue says. “But I was scared. He wanted to meet me. I didn’t want to meet him. We finally met. We talked. He talked about never getting a opportunity to see his grandchildren. He moved me in a way I never been.”

O’Donoghue became convinced that experiencing hunting and fishing were powerful pleasures to legions of the disabled, particularly youngsters, and she took upon herself to provide sustenance to their dreams.

Initially, she contacted deer farmers for the use of their deer and expertise. They were eager to support her work.

“Nobody ever said, ‘No!’ to me,” she said.

With a ready supply of deer on hand, she set out to find the dreamers.

“I ended up on a radio station in North Carolina ... and here I am ... speech impaired,” she said.

“But the people at the station didn’t know that. I was so scared ... but then the program started with guys on the air started joking around ... and the whole world changed overnight.”

“Since then I’ve been all over the country on radio and television promoting the availability of this program.”
Lindsey Peotter of Wisconsin Rapids is assisted in sighting her rifle by her deer hunting guide, Steve Henry of Birnamwood. Lindsey, who has bone cancer, recently participated in a hunt organized by Shannon Thiex of Birnamwood, the United Special Sportsmen Alliance and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

of the United Special Sportsmen Alliance to furnish the means to fulfill the outdoor wishes of the disabled and terminally ill.

In addition to the central Wisconsin deer hunt, O’Donoghue organized a pheasant hunt for eight youthful participants and set up fishing excursions throughout the summer months.

“We do lots of fishing all over the country,” she said. “We fish freshwater and the ocean, even deep sea fishing down south. We do lots of group events, including camping, canoeing and horseback riding.”

Kurt Thiede, DNR wildlife regulations policy specialist, said hunting aspects of O’Donoghue’s program have been approved through the DNR’s “Learn to Hunt” authority.

“We’re trying to accommodate her and these children as must as possible,” Thiede said. “She’s definitely coming from the heart on this.”

All of the children’s trips and accommodations are arranged with volunteer help. O’Donoghue has been blessed with an abundance of benefactors who relish the outdoors and an opportunity to share their abilities with others less fortunate.

“It just seems like this was something that was meant to be,” said Pete Normington, a Pittsville cranberry farmer who has served as vice president of the Alliance since its inception.

“We haven’t held any fundraisers. We do depend on hunting organizations for help. We’ve gotten donations from Safari Club International and Whitetails Unlimited that have helped pay the cost of families traveling to a location.

“But definitely, the weak link is financial. We just haven’t had time to organize something like that.”

“I’ve never paid a dime for a hunting or fishing trip in America,” O’Donoghue said. “In

2004, we guided over 1,000 youngsters on trips all over America with a value in excess of $1.5 million.

“I don’t draw a salary, though my company helps with some of my expenses. Nobody gets a dime for anything they do. I don’t want anybody making a dime off these children. I don’t believe in that.”

She does believe, however, in making an impact on people’s lives — just as she has had impact on her own.

More information

To learn more about United Special Sportsmen Alliance, write Bridgid O’Donoghue, president, USSA, 7864 Shotwell Road, Pittsville WI 54466; call 900-518-8019; e-mail: biotec@tds.net or log on to www.childswish.com.