Alliance grants outdoors wishes

OUTDOORS EDITOR
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Brigid O’Donoghue provides hunting and fishing experiences for children and adults with disabilities and life-threatening illnesses.

“I’ve taken children with every type of disability,” O’Donoghue said in a phone interview from her office in Pittsville. “I feel every child should have the opportunity to enjoy the great outdoors.”

O’Donoghue is president and founder of a wish-granting charity called the United Special Sportsmen Alliance. Since its beginning in 2000, the organization has fulfilled more than 3,500 wishes for people across the nation, most of which involved hunting or fishing.

“Better the fit, the more sick you are,” she said. “When you get out in the great outdoors, you feel a peace in your heart that you can’t explain.”

O’Donoghue never hunted or fished when she was growing up in Milwaukee. In 1998, she started a business developing animal feed for deer and elk and selling it to game farm operators across the country.

The idea for the charity started in 2000, when a game farm owner told O’Donoghue that he wanted to donate a hunt to someone with a terminal illness. It took her awhile to find a match and, after she did, O’Donoghue wanted to do more.

“If I knew all these people who own deer farms all across the country, why not get them together with people with disabilities?” she figured.

At a trade show in Las Vegas in 2001, she decided to go from booth to booth asking game farm owners whether they’d be willing to donate hunts.

“Nobody said no to me,” she said. “I left there with over $40,000 in hunts.”

Before long, word was getting out and she started to get phone calls from more businesses interested in donating hunts.

“I had $75,000 in hunts and nobody to use them,” she said. That changed quickly later that year after she did a national television special with the John Boy & Billy Big Show on a trip to North Carolina.

“It just went absolutely crazy,” she said. “In less than 48 hours I had 47 children from all over the United States. Their parents called me. I was in total shock.”

Their wishes were granted in the next two months and since then the requests have continued to pour in. About 65 percent of children involved in hunting or fishing, although some have included horseback riding or boats and race car rides, she said. Participants hunt deer, elk, bear, turkeys, raccoons, pheasants and catch all kinds of fish.

“We hunt on public land, private land and game farms,” she said. “Last July we did a fishing event on a huge cranberry marsh right where Galapagos is.”

In 2004, the organization was licensed as a non-profit charity. Today it has a nine-member board of directors and more than 100 volunteers doing office work, guiding, providing transportation and more.

“Every one of them works for free,” she said, and everything is donated — the money, services, hunting and fishing trips, even taxidermy. “We have done over $3.5 million in hunting and fishing trips and taxidermy work since 2000 when it was founded.”

Asked what motivated her, O’Donoghue responded that it was her experience growing up with a brother with encephalitis and epilepsy.

“I never ever gave up.” She said. “I tell them (children participating in the program) that you need to keep fighting. I hope that I’m setting a positive example.”

Although the organization will accept anyone, regardless of age or disability, O’Donoghue said she shares a special bond with the children. She accompanies many of them on their hunting trips and, through those experiences, has become an avid hunter herself.

“I’ve hunted all over the country,” she said. “I love the sport.”

If you are interested in applying for a trip, or know someone who is, visit the organization’s Web site at www.childswish.com, or call (800) 518-9991.

As O’Donoghue put it, “I’m always looking for more children.”

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