Alliance makes dreams come true for ill, handicapped children

By Allen Hicks
Marshfield News-Herald

An organization started by a rural Pittsville woman three years ago is looking for more disabled or terminally ill children to benefit from hunting or fishing trips.

People around the country have donated trips and funds to United Special Sportsmen Alliance Inc., which recently filed to become a nonprofit organization, said Bridgid O'Donoghue, president and Pittsville resident. USA organizers arranged 77 expense-paid trips in 2002, and even more are planned this year.

"This is really growing. It's gotten huge," O'Donoghue said. "I think generosity is all around us. The only thing we're lacking is we need more children. It doesn't matter what their disability or their illness. We'll take them all."

Wisconsin Rapids-based Northland Cranberries Inc. recently became one of the main sponsors of the nonprofit organization.

"We think it's a good way to help children who are seriously ill to enjoy the outdoors," said Tom Enwright, Northland spokesman.

One hunting trip recipient, Cory Smith, 16, of Altamont, Kan., has a rare condition that causes his body to attack his blood cells. Three years ago today, doctors diagnosed the disease, and he has been taking medication ever since.

For a time, he was getting blood platelet transfusions every second day. His condition has improved since his spleen was removed, but doctors expect he'll need a bone marrow transplant at some point, said his mother, Tina.

Although he was weakened by his condition, Cory, an avid deer hunter, was excited when John Mozingo, a USA board member, offered him a chance to go elk hunting in southeastern Iowa.

"I had a blast," said Cory, who had never hunted elk before.

He shot an elk the second day of his trip in January.

"He was on cloud nine," Tina said. "That did more for him than anything anybody's done. It was amazing the change in Cory when he got to do that. We just think what they're doing is great."

Mozingo can relate to some of the young people his organization is helping. He has Crohn's disease, and doctors told him he wouldn't live to the age of 50. The Chetopa, Kan., man is now 51.

He was planning to arrange charitable hunting trips on his own when he heard about O'Donoghue's Dream Hunt program on a nationally syndicated radio show. Since that time, Mozingo has been an active member in USA, setting up hunts for people throughout the country.

"We're getting more hunts every day and more kids every day," Mozingo said. "We made a lot of kids smile. That's my goal — to make them smile."

Since his disease has heavily damaged his intestines, Mozingo is unable to do any heavy lifting or hold a job. He takes almost 40 pills a day to help him deal with his condition. Now he spends most of his time looking for children who might be helped by the organization.

"You don't have aches and pains when you see some of these kids, I guarantee you," Mozingo said. "It's a lot of satisfaction. If you could just see their faces, you'd really understand."

USSA board president Walter D. Smith isn't a hunter himself, but he believes in the organization and its potential to help people.

"It's pretty exciting," said Smith of Baraboo, who said he was inspired to become a part of the effort by O'Donoghue.

"She's just about as big-hearted a person as you're going to find in the world," said Smith, who owns a certified public accounting firm and is an author and motivational speaker.

The bonding and peace that the hunting and fishing trips bring to families is one of the most rewarding aspects of the program, O'Donoghue said.

"This year is the year that we've really blossomed," O'Donoghue said, explaining that there are fund-raisers throughout the country, including an upcoming $100-a-plate dinner in the city of New York. "So it's all over the country. Everybody's coming on board now."

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