Area commercial fishermen help put smiles on young faces

United Special Sportsmen Alliance seeks more youngsters and volunteers to help create outdoor adventures of a lifetime

By Ted Pennekamp

Some area commercial fishermen helped give quite a thrill to youth from around the country recently at a catfishing event in Black River Falls.

Mike Valley of Valley Fish and Cheese of Prairie du Chien and Denny and Jim Boardman of De Soto all had a hand in supplying the catfish for a United Special Sportsmen Alliance (USSA) event on July 16 in which 75 youth with life-threatening illnesses or disabilities happily participated.

Valley was asked by longtime friend Brigid O’Donoghue, the president of USSA, if he could supply the catfish for the event. Valley wasn’t fishing at the time so he called Denny and Jim Boardman, who were trapping catfish in hoop nets during the spring spawning season.

The Boardman’s supplied about four day’s haul, or 500-600 pounds of channel catfish weighing anywhere from 3 pounds to 10 pounds.

Minnesota, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Florida, Texas, Georgia, Alabama, Oklahoma and Missouri to name a few.

“Our goal next year is to have 120 children,” said O’Donoghue, who noted that she is seeking participants from all over, including Prairie du Chien and the surrounding area. “We’re always looking for more children.” Next year’s catfishing event in Pittsville is scheduled for July 29, 2006.

At this year’s event, the youth were helped in their endeavors by several pro bass fishermen and pro catfishermen, O’Donoghue said. The catfish were caught on nightcrawlers and numerous other secret recipes. Pro bass fishermen also took children out in their bass boats to catch bluegills, bass and walleye on a nearby 50-acre lake, much to the enjoyment of all.

One lucky fisherman, Ryan Novey of Reedsburg, had the adrenaline rush of hauling in a 25-pound catfish. “He was really excited,” O’Donoghue said. Several pro fisherman helped youngsters catch good-sized catfish at the USSA event.

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“Spawning fish survive much better in captivity,” explained Denny Boardman, who noted that when members of the USSA came to pick up the catfish, the Boardman’s also loaned them a live tank, to praise the efforts of Mike Valley and Denny and Jim Boardman. “He has a beautiful heart,” she said of Valley, whom she has known for about 20 years. “Without him and the Boardman’s we wouldn’t have had all those catfish. It was a much better event this year.”

“The thought was there,” said Valley, who made it clear that it was really the hard work of the Boardman cousins that supplied the catfish. “All I did was line it up.”

Valley and the Boardman’s in turn praised the energetic and ongoing efforts of O’Donoghue.

“She’s really a super person, the way she helps these kids,” said Valley.

“It’s a wonderful thing she’s doing,” said Denny Boardman, who noted that O’Donoghue has sent him much correspondence and many photos. “To see the smiles on these kids’ faces, it’s amazing. More people should know about it (the USSA). It’s a great thing. It’s just wonderful. It offers a little glimmer of hope.”

Indeed, O’Donoghue and USSA have been granting the fishing, hunting and outdoor adventure wishes of youth with life-threatening illnesses and disabilities from all over the country for the past five years.

This past year, O’Donoghue won the National Outdoor Youth Mentoring Award and USSA granted more than 1,000 wishes worth $1.5 million. The memories of a lifetime, of course, are priceless. USSA and its 100 volunteers nationwide has granted 2,100 wishes in the past five years.

“People just keep giving,” said O’Donoghue, who noted that USSA continues to expand by leaps and bounds. “We’re growing constantly and we’re an all-volunteer organization.”

O’Donoghue said that 7 percent of the youth in the United States have life-threatening illnesses or disabilities and that USSA is a grassroots, nonprofit organization dedicated to providing those children with the fishing, hunting and outdoor adventures of a lifetime.

O’Donoghue said that she formed the organization in 2000 after granting a wish for a dying man in Texas. “I was so moved by it,” she said of the experience.

O’Donoghue said that she is currently working on several projects, including working with the Wisconsin legislature to pass a bill whereby youth with life-threatening illnesses or disabilities could get free hunting and fishing licenses.

“It looks really good,” she said. “Once we get it passed in Wisconsin then we’ll go nationwide.”

O’Donoghue is also working with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources to put together a learn-to-hunt program and a youth deer hunt for those with life-threatening illnesses or disabilities.

In addition, O’Donoghue has been contacting professional golfers and working with NASCAR and the NFL in order to get sports celebrities to hunt and fish with “her children.”

Brigid O’Donoghue, the president and founder of USSA, can be contacted at (715) 884-2256 or by fax at (715) 884-7388 or by e-mail at biotec@tds.net. Her website is www.childswish.com.