By BRANDI SCHUBERT
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Earlier this month Michael Keen traveled to Fulton from his Michigan home and made a 100-yard shot - equivalent to the length of a football field - that killed a buck in one try.

A feat in itself, Keen's accomplishment was all the more challenging as an 8-year-old bone cancer patient who uses a motorized scooter for mobility.

Keen was offered the chance to make his hunting dream come true by the Central Missouri Chapter of Safari Club International as part of its Safari Wish program.

"Michael's used to being in the hospital with other sick kids, but for one weekend he was just one of the guys," said Larry Dotson, a Safari Wish coordinator. "What are the odds? He can't walk, but he goes to the stand, up comes a buck and in one amazing shot he gets it. Michael was so excited, he took off so fast none of us could catch up to him.

"I'm sure it was memorable for him, and I know it was a moment none of us will forget. Everybody was crying for happiness. ... For us this is what it's all about."

Funds raised at an annual auction, about $70,000, contributed to SCI inviting an additional participant this year, its first female guest.

Kayla Black of DuQuoin, Ill. joined Keen for a Safari Wish of her own. Hitting the bullseye of a practice target on the first shot was a good indication she could "hold her own," Dotson said.

Once she set foot on hunting ground, Black brought down an elk weighing more than 800 pounds.

"Kayla's enjoying the elk steak," her father, Charles Black, told The Fulton Sun. "I think we'll be enjoying elk steak for a long time."

Black suffers from juvenile dermatomyositis, arthritis and osteoporosis - making her 12-year-old bones comparable to that of an 80-year-old. With the use of a back brace and wheelchair or walker, she can tolerate walking for short periods of time.

"What a trooper she was. You wouldn't know how much she's been through because of her attitude," Dotson said. "Her spirits were up the whole time she was here. She doesn't sit around and have a pity party. She's truly a remarkable kid, and adults could take lessons from her outlook."

Providing food and lodging to each child and his or her family, Safari Wish organizers work to ensure the weekend is memorable for the kids and relaxing for the families.

"Most of the families are strapped," Dotson said. "For many, the insurance ran out years ago and the parents are doing everything they can financially to keep their children alive. Our job is to provide everything they need during their stay so the parents can relax.

"You can see how grateful the parents are. For me, the appreciation goes a long way. When you see that look in their eyes, you know you've done a good thing."

For Charles Black and his wife, Kim, Safari Wish not only made Kayla's dream come true, but offered them all a much-needed leisurely weekend.

"Safari Wish was just great," said Charles Black, who first heard about the local chapter while watching the television program Outdoors in the Heartland. "They treated us like gold. These people would bend over backwards for you. They did everything they possibly could for us. ... I just can't say enough good things about them."

SCI vice-president Dr. William Cravens is present during each hunt in case any medical concerns arise. The group will follow up the event with a Christmas banquet, which Kayla Black and Michael Keen plan to attend. The children's mounts will be presented then.

Now in its third year, Safari Wish was established by the local SCI chapter after the Make-A-Wish Foundation decided to cut its hunting and fishing component.

Comprising about 250 members, the local chapter of SCI designed the event to fulfill the wishes of kids battling life-threatening illnesses. The outing is videotaped and the game is taken to a local taxidermist at no cost to the children or their families.

For Dotson, the experience is rewarding as well as educational.

"When you think things aren't quite right, you look at these kids and you think, I've got it made," he said.