PITTSVILLE — Brigid O’Donoghue remembers what it was like to be sick as a child.

“I had viral encephalitis when I was 10 months old,” said O’Donoghue, who celebrated her 42nd birthday Saturday. Later, she developed seizures, which resulted in brain surgery at the age of 21.

She also has a brother, Sean, 35, who is developmentally and physically challenged.

Instead of looking at life negatively, O’Donoghue channeled her energy into founding the United Special Sportsmen Alliance.

The nonprofit organization grants outdoor wishes to children with disabilities and life-threatening illnesses.

“A lot of these children don’t get the opportunity to go hunting and fishing,” O’Donoghue said. “Just treat them like your own children; they’re no different.”

She likes to give them the chance to “not feel sick,” unwind and have a good time.

The organization is run by volunteers and funded through grants and donations. This year’s third annual fishing event was aided by a grant by the Brett Favre Fourward Foundation and Safari Club International. Members of the Pittsville Lions Club grilled up burgers and hot dogs; a pig roast was held Saturday night.

Brigid O’Donoghue, organizer of United Special Sportsmen Alliance, picks up her video camera as she greets a friend arriving Saturday at the USSA event held at a Jackson County cranberry marsh.

The event has grown since 30 children attended the first event.

“Last year, we had 73 children plus their families,” she said. “And they come from all over the country.”

The event is held on the property O’Donoghue shares with her boyfriend, Pete Normington. The couple hopes to see the event continue to expand.

“I hope every year, the number triples,” she says. “That’s my goal.”

She’d like to someday host 5,000 people at the event. Normington has promised they’ll make room on the property when that happens.

As people ate, swam and engaged in other outdoor fun Saturday, someone started singing “Happy Birthday” to O’Donoghue.

“I could not get a better birthday gift than to have the opportunity to be around all (these) children,” she said. “They mean the world to me.”

The smiles and hugs are everything to O’Donoghue, who is constantly side-tracked by someone stopping to say hello, give her a hug or let them know how big of a fish they caught.

The hardest part of the event is saying goodbye, she said, so she tells the participants she’ll “see them later.”

“My greatest love is these children,” she said. “I can’t put it into words.”