Dream of a lifetime bear hunts made possible by USSA, members of local bear-hunting club

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The Park Falls Herald

PARK FALLS — Jordan Lafler is not unlike most 12-year-old boys. He enjoys fishing, four-wheeling and working on race cars, but he “lives and breathes” hunting.

One difference between Jordan and his contemporaries is the adversity he must have each day. Jordan suffers from terminal bone cancer and cancerous nodules which develop on his lungs. For Jordan and his mother Gina, this often means long hospital stays, rounds of vigorous chemotherapy and blood transfusions.

Miles Miller is 15 years old. His hobbies include camping, fishing, playing with his chocolate lab, Abby, and surfing the net on his home computer. His favorite websites are outdoor-oriented, as Miles, too, “lives and breathes” hunting.

A member of Boy Scouts of America, Miles earned the rank of Eagle Scout in 2003. He rode 50 miles in eight hours on a three-wheel bicycle to earn his bicycling merit badge. Miles suffers from cerebral palsy, which affects the entire right side of his body. He can walk, but has a very pronounced limp.

What brought these two young men to a common place? A common dream. The dream of a Northwoods black bear hunt. A dream brought to life by United Special Sportsmen Alliance and a group of Park Falls area bear hunters.

According to Miles’ father, Scott Miller, when Miles was visiting various outdoor and hunting-related websites, he came across one which claimed to cater to disabled kids. Scott, describing himself as a cautious parent, figured “if it sounded too good to be true, it probably was.”

In this case, the old adage didn’t hold true. At Miles’ insistence, and after doing his homework, Scout found USSA, a program dedicated to “Bringing Children Inner Peace Through the Great Outdoors.” Miles went through the application process, which includes proof of illness or disability and a letter from his attending physician.

Jordan learned of USSA through a classmate’s father, who encouraged Jordan and Gina to contact the organization. Jordan went through the application process as well, but was in chemotherapy at the time of his first contact.

Brigid O’Donoghue, founder and president of USSA, called Jordan at the hospital where he was receiving his

source of income from USSA. All work is strictly volunteer.

The board is the governing body, controlling USSA’s affairs. Board members oversee its business, vote and appoint officers. There is also an associate board and a junior board, each with no legal power to oversee business, but empowered to carry out certain tasks spelled out in the corporation’s agreement. Junior board members must be between the ages of 10 and 18. Miles Miller was the first young person to be appointed to the junior board.

In information posted on the USSA website, “The Team” is described as being only as good as the people who are in it’s lineup, reading, in part “…At USSA we try to pick people who, above all, have a genuine care for the special sportmen this charity is designed to service. In addition, a true commitment to our outdoor heritage is a must for all members of the board of directors and management team.”

O’Donoghue credits her close bond with her mentally and physically disabled brother, Sean, as a stepping stone in helping the less fortunate. She also overcame childhood illnesses, epilepsy, brain surgery and a permanent disability, giving her much in common with those she is attempting to assist.

Early on she discovered that if she was going to help challenged youngsters fulfill their dreams and make a difference in their lives, she would need to make a difference in her own life. She credits friend and fellow board member Pete Normington for his help in transforming her from a girl who “never got dirty” to one who is now comfortable in jeans, t-shirt and hiking boots, driving an SUV and thinking about what makes others’ happy, instead of the self-gratifying and shallow lifestyle she’d lived previously. She finds that by taking kids into the wild for a hunt that is their dream, she gets more than she gives, and feels a true affinity with those she is attempting to help because of her own past life experiences.

“Devoting my time to help those in need can be a meaningful way to teach my own children and others to be less selfish and more thankful. I want my children to learn that one does not always have to be paid in order to do an act of kindness for others,” O’Donoghue said. “Compassion and unselfishness can be nurtured deep in the souls of my children and others, by witnessing wishes being granted to the less fortunate.”

In July of 2004, O’Donoghue held a get-together at her property in Pittsville for her dreamwish kids, their families and others. Present were Normington and fellow bear hunter Carl Burgeson of Wisconsin Rapids. Burgeson and Normington are bear hunting companions of the entire Bob Mader family, Dave Treml and his son, Dan, Pete Yunk, Don and Jim Seigler, Dale Staufflet and others who make up a well-known crew of bear hunters in the Park Falls area.

When O’Donoghue asked Burgeson, “If I can get these kids a tag, will you get them a bear hunt?” The answer was an unequivocal yes.

When this writer asked Bob Mader why he decided to help these kids with a bear hunt, going so far as to provide them with accommodation, his answer was simply, “Who wouldn’t?”

Late September found Jordan, accompanied by Normington, in Park Falls for his first bear hunt. According to Jordan, hunting over bait on the Mader’s property, he was not in the stand five minutes when a bear came through.

“It was like a guiding hand led that bear in,” Bob Mader would say later.

Jordan readily admits to the bear hunters’ equivalent to buck fever. “My heart was pounding and I was shaking,” he said.

A week later, Miles and his father, Scott, were in the company of many of the same hunting group for Miles’ first bear hunt. They would be hunting with hounds owned by Dan Treml and Don and Jim Seigler. A bear led the dogs on a merry chase, but when they tried it a short time later, Miles’ shot found the mark. Those on the hunt claimed that had Miles been any closer, the bear would have landed on his feet.