Fishing event to help terminally ill, disabled children

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For children who are disabled or terminally ill, getting a surge of adrenaline is just what the doctor should have ordered.

Although members of the United Special Sportsmen Alliance are not physicians, they know taking a child fishing or hunting helps lift their outlook on life.

"One of the things you have to understand is that when these kids get sick, their whole life changes," said James Lakeman, chairman of the United Special Sportsmen Alliance. "It goes from playing sports to visiting the hospital — going fishing or hunting makes kids feel normal."

Thursday, this grassroots, non-profit organization will host more than 75 terminally ill and disabled children from 10 states at the alliance's Outdoor Water Sport Event at a cranberry marsh between City Point and Black River Falls, said Brigid O'Donoghue, president and founder of the alliance.

Granting the first wish, the gratification of the act compelled her to start the organization in 2000.

"It was so moving that I thought I would do a couple more (wishes)," O'Donoghue said. "Since then, I've granted over 2,000 wishes."

Their second annual event in Wisconsin is made possible by the generosity of the all-volunteer team and corporate sponsors, O'Donoghue said. Since donations exceed the number of children they have, O'Donoghue added that people interested in enrolling a child should.

"When I find a child, I immediately try to find a place for them," she said. "Participating is easy and it's free."

Arpin resident Wendy Lorence is excited her 7-year-old son, Dylan, will have the opportunity to go fishing with the alliance. She said the experience will help distract Dylan from his illness, neurofibromatosis, a genetic disorder of the nervous system which causes tumors to form on nerves in the body.

"I'm glad he's going because that way Dylan can see he's not the only one in a wheelchair," Lorence said. "I hope he finds a little more acceptance being there. He needs to accept he's going to be in a wheelchair forever."

For volunteers like John Olik, attending the event is a gratifying experience.

"It's a great time for the kids, but the volunteers walk away with the most."