Former Prairie du Chien resident making kids’ dreams come true

by Mark Schaaf

No child should get left behind. It’s a phrase that has been coined and thrown around the last few years, but for Brigid O’Donoghue, it takes on a whole new meaning.

O’Donoghue, a former Prairie du Chien resident of 14 years who now resides in Pittsville, started the nonprofit United Special Sportsmen Alliance (USSA) in 2000 and has spent much of the last few years making dreams come true.

The USSA is a grassroots organization dedicated to providing seriously ill and disabled children with the hunting, fishing and outdoor “adventures of a lifetime.”

The satisfaction in the program, according to O’Donoghue, comes from watching the happiness the children and families exhibit while on these outdoor trips.

“To me, there isn’t anything more touching than putting my arms around a ‘special child,’” O’Donoghue said, “and letting them know how much we care for them.”

The first hunt was put on in the fall of 2001 with a young Texas man who had terminal cancer. He came up to Wisconsin and shot a 10-point buck on a shooting preserve.

Since then, they have helped more than 650 children on dream trips. The goal for 2004 is to send more than 1,000 youngsters on these trips.

“(It’s) a lofty mission to be sure,” O’Donoghue said. “But one I truly believe we can achieve.”

The roots of her interest in helping special children come from her own childhood—she can relate to what those children are going through.

“I have found that when parents of sick kids realize that I have struggled so much in my own life,” O’Donoghue said, “they feel a lot of ease working with me.”

When she was 10 months old, she contracted encephalitis. She was in a coma, paralyzed on the right side, and had epilepsy.

While living in Prairie du Chien in 1985, she had brain surgery and lost her ability to speak. After six years of speech therapy, she now says that speaking is her greatest asset.

“I struggled a lot after my surgery trying to get words to my lips,” O’Donoghue said. “I looked down at the ground a lot when I talked to people out of embarrassment.

“Now I could out-talk anyone and I travel all over the nation.”

On July 31, O’Donoghue and USSA threw a big outdoor event near Black River Falls for 25 disabled and terminal children and their families.

Mike Valley of Valley Fish in Prairie du Chien helped O’Donoghue stock the lake, which is privately owned, with large catfish.

The children, whose illnesses range from blindness to leukemia to Down’s Syndrome, were joined by many professional fisherman from around the Midwest.

“To a lot of those children, that will be the only vacation,” O’Donoghue said. “And we want to make it special for each and every one of them.”

Four brothers who especially touched O’Donoghue’s heart are classic examples of how the USSA has touched.

Micah, Alex, Zech and Aidan all attended the July 31 event. Micah, the big brother at 14, made it a point to watch over the others. Alex and Zech are three years old and were born prematurely and have various health problems, while the youngest, Aidan, has to remain on medication daily for congestive heart failure.

Even O’Donoghue’s own son was sick at a young age, and with the help of modern medicine he is able to live a healthy life.

“I’m hoping that in five years,” O’Donoghue said. “Micah, Alex, Zech and Aidan will be waterskiing and tubing with my family.”

When she founded Bio-Tec Research, Inc., deer and elk feed company for farms and shooting preserves throughout the U.S., O’Donoghue applied for a lot of the lessons she learned while in Prairie. She lived in Prairie du Chien from 1983 to 1997, starting her business, K-L Wood Products, at the age of 30. She sold a lot of sawdust to area farmers and found a great interest in working with them before moving to Pittsville in 2002.

“Pittsville has many of the same positive qualities as Prairie du Chien,” O’Donoghue said. “Such as friendly, hard working people that place a high value on family and character.”

In addition to O’Donoghue, Joel Espe, a member of the USSA’s board of directors, ran a business in Prairie du Chien before he relocated and became a grade school principal in Wisconsin.

No wishes have been granted to children who have already passed away. The USSA grants wishes to children ages 0 to 18, and also helps clothe and feed the children.”