Group makes hunting dreams come true

Five years ago Brigid O'Donaghue helped a friend in Wisconsin arrange a deer hunt for a man who was dying of pancreatic cancer.

She had never shot a gun and had no interest in going, especially because she was uneasy about befriending a man who was dying. She did go, though, and says that the man's response changed her life.

"He fell asleep and he landed on my lap - a dying man," said the 41-year-old animal feed provider from Pittsville, Wis. "I put my arms around him and it was overwhelming. I said, 'You know what, Brigid, you've got a calling.'"

O'Donaghue then founded United Special Sportsmen Alliance with the goal of helping as many ill and disabled hunters as possible. She coordinates hunters with volunteers, calling organizations and individuals throughout the states to see if they're willing to take someone hunting.

She estimates she has put some 1,900 hunters in touch with people who could help. It's a potential growth niche, given that some major nonprofit groups that grant wishes won't touch hunting. The Make-A-Wish Foundation, for instance, does not bring youngsters hunting. Although O'Donaghue suspects political pressure against trophy hunting influenced Make-A-Wish, officials with the organization give a simpler explanation.

"We can't do anything that involves the use of firearms," said Camille Oliver, Anchorage-based wish manager of the Make-A-Wish Foundation of Alaska, Montana, Northern Idaho and Washington. It's a safety and liability issue, she said.

The organization does field requests for Alaska fishing trips, she said.

O'Donaghue said she appreciates what Make-A-Wish contributes, but that not every sick child wants to go to Disneyland or meet a celebrity. Some are hunters, or want to be.

"If a child is dying and they want to go on a hunt, I don't think we have the right to say no," she said.

Neither does she think that state governments should stand in the way. In addition to organizing hunting volunteers, O'Donaghue said she is beginning a campaign to make hunting free to the terminally ill and disabled, state by state. First up is Wisconsin, where she has drafted legislation for consideration and expects a warm reception.

"There are a lot of really kind-hearted people," she said. "Nobody knows how to say the word 'no' to me."