Showing off the eight-point buck he shot at Thiex Pheasant Ranch in Shawano County, Oconomowoc's Mark Miller is flanked by his mother Laura and father Robert. The hunt was produced through the efforts of the United Special Sportsmen Association.

Hunting a wish

“(My life) has been traumatic. I think I bond easily (with children),” said Brigid O'Donoghue, left, who has helped fulfill wishes for more than 200 people through USSA.

The United Special Sportsmen Association has targeted the disabled and terminally ill for free outdoors adventures.

Robert Miller, a cash grain farmer from Oconomowoc, walked into Exhibition Hall at the Alliant Center last April 6 with his son Mark.

Mark maneuvered his motorized wheelchair across the field to show off his deer.

“People have to be, yet kind hearted and sin-
and it’s huge, maybe more in his mind than the physical part of it.”

**An interested party**

For O’Donoghue, mother of two teenagers, she need only look to her sleeve — it’s the one which bears her heart — to arouse sympathy for others.

The 39-year-old daughter of Irish parents faced numerous physical and emotional challenges growing up on a dairy farm near Milwaukee.

As a baby, she suffered from paralyzation on her right side as the result of encephalitis — it is a rare viral infection which inflames the brain and affects only a few thousand people a year in the United States, according to the Mayo Clinic Brain and Nervous System Center — and, among other surgical procedures, survived brain surgery and, more recently, a bout with cancer.

“Tired of six years just to say my own name,” O’Donoghue recalls of a childhood during which she worried her partly shaved head would bring ridicule.

Now, the woman whose accomplishments do not include a college degree or a full-time job until she was 30 years old, uses her voice and an unrelenting drive to make her wish — and countless others — come true.

“My life has been traumatic. I think I bond easily (with children),” O’Donoghue said. “I made it and I’m doing fine.

“My greatest disability has become my asset — that’s my mouth — to promote USSA.”

**Getting the word out**

USSA was born out of O’Donoghue’s desire to make a difference in people’s lives, although she admits it took her years to figure out in which capacity she could accomplish her goal.

She had no hunting experience, but she nevertheless saw an opportunity when the Make-A-Wish Foundation announced a few years ago that it would no longer honor requests for hunting trips from terminally ill children.

She enlisted sponsors such as Wisconsin Rapids’ Northland Cranberries, Inc.; Matthews Solocom, Inc. — it’s a company from Sparta which produces archery equipment and Safari Club International. She called upon the work of USSA staff, some of whom have disabilities and some of whom work for Bio-Tec Research, to promote its charitable efforts.

For instance, Walter Smith, a CPA for Baraboo accounting firm Smith and Moy, is chairman of the board while serving as financial advisor and accountant for Bio-Tec Research.

“He is as tough as a nail when he comes to these children,” O’Donoghue said.

O’Donoghue, who has since become avid hunter and angler, said she hasn’t been lacking for clients since she got word out about USSA. She has spearheaded publicity for the organization’s causes, getting television coverage on The Outdoor Channel and magazine articles in issues of Texas Trophy Hunters, Whitetail Fanatic, Bear Hunting and Boar Hunting.

The big break, she said, came following a radio spot on the syndicated national production of the John Boy and Billy Big Show.

“In less than 24 hours we had 42 children,” she said.

What followed has been a whirlwind.

“We’re just trying to find more kids,” added O’Donoghue, noting that USSA can help pay for travel expenses to or from anywhere in the United States.

In recent months, USSA has assisted in producing hunts for a handful of state residents like Mark Miller in Wisconsin or elsewhere.

Among them:

- Colby’s Trenton Lieders, 18, paralyzed from a motorcycle accident, shot an eight-point buck last month in Wild Rose.
- Dale Block, a Black River Falls businessman who has a terminal case of cancer, shot an elk in Iowa last month. Block has been added to USSA’s board of directors.
- Chris Davis, a young man from Onalaska who recently passed away following brain cancer, got to go on a boat hunt in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula.
- Holmen’s Jordan Lafler, 12, is battling cancer and is signed up for a deer hunt in Oklahoma.

“I never dreamt it would be like this,” said O’Donoghue, who said she’s gotten invaluable assistance and support from people from all walks of life. “You’d be surprised how many Grandpa-type guys call up and want to help and take someone fishing.”

**To get involved**

For more information about USSA and its programs, go to www.deerfood.com.

Anyone looking to contribute, assist or nominate a disabled or terminally ill person for an outdoors adventure can contact USSA by writing to USSA, 7864 Shottwell Road, Pittsville, WI 54466, calling 1-800-518-8019 or 715-884-2256, or by sending e-mail to bio-tec@tds.net.

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