Kids experience the thrill of catching ‘the big one’ on waters of Rend Lake

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The waters of Rend Lake were a new experience for some on Monday, as kids who are terminally ill and/or disabled fished for “the big one,” accompanied by experienced guides and volunteers.

John Reilly, owner of the Rend Lake Resort, said he attended a media conference in Chicago, where Bridg O’Donoghue, founder of United Special Sportsmen Alliance, was receiving an award for fulfilling a dream wish.

“After she received her award, I talked with her about her program and was very impressed, so I invited her to bring a group to Rend Lake Resort,” Reilly said. “We are all about hunting and fishing here, so Bridg brought a group and the resort paid for the lodging and meals.”

O’Donoghue, who was raised in Milwaukee, has a brother who was physically disabled, which prompted the idea for the organization.

O’Donoghue, who overcame childhood illnesses, epilepsy, brain surgery, and a permanent disability, is on a mission to take care of children.

“My goal is to grant terminally ill and disabled sportsmen and women an outdoors adventure of their dreams,” O’Donoghue said. “We had 14 very special children at Rend Lake Resort, and I could tell by the looks on their faces that none of them wanted to leave.”

The non-profit Christian organization, which coordinates with other organizations worldwide to fulfill dream wishes, operates strictly on donations, O’Donoghue said.

“Through the donations, Americans helping Americans is a time-honored tradition,” she said. “The guides who took the kids out to fish donated their time to make this happen and the kids had a wonderful time.”

O’Donoghue said her next adventure would be in Wisconsin, where she will help 75 kids fulfill their wish, and then she is off to Washington to help another group.

“But I talked with John (Reilly) this morning, and we are talking about doing another project at Rend Lake Resort,” O’Donoghue said. “I want to help terminally ill cancer patients have the trip of a lifetime. I know of a family here in Illinois, where the mother has cancer and John and I want to work together to provide the experience for her.”

O’Donoghue said she works with property owners of deer, elk, turkey, bear and pheasant farms, as well as hunting and fishing preserves and ranches to make the trips possible.

“John was so generous in his offer to let us use the Resort and I want to come back and make this happen for someone else,” O’Donoghue said.

Scott Phillips said he and his family were at the Resort for Father’s Day when O’Donoghue approached them.

“Bridg saw us and asked my son, Ryan, if he wanted to go fishing,” Phillips said. “He went out with his guide, Barry Featheringill, and caught a 15-inch largemouth bass.”

O’Donoghue said her USSA team is comprised of people who have a genuine care for the special sportsmen the charity is designed to serve.

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Ryan Phillips, seated, caught a 15-inch largemouth bass Monday at Rend Lake as one of a group of 14 terminally ill and disabled children who benefited through the United Special Sportsmen Alliance, an organization working to fulfill dreams. Ryan’s guide, Barry Featheringill, is director of the Central Illinois Division of USA BassIn. Ryan’s father, Scott, said his family was at Rend Lake Resort for Father’s Day.

Photo by Mona Sandefur