American Catfish Association members Eric Halgren (back) and Catfish Bill (running the motor) take their boat out to open water on Rend Lake. The pair were guiding Zach Allen of Pekin (left) and Shane O’Donoghue of Lake Zurich. Top, Halgren helps Allen find Rend Lake catfish Monday.

Disabled, seriously ill children embrace life in fishing getaway

-- BY BECKY MALKOVICH --

WHITTINGTON — If nothing else, Austin Wilson will leave the Rend Lake Resort today with one whopper of a fish tale.

The 6-year-old Metropolis boy was one of 13 disabled or seriously ill participants in a fantastic three-day fishing getaway held at Rend Lake Resort that ends today. Sponsored by the resort and United Special Sportsmen Alliance, Wilson and the others were taken on guided fishing trips with professional fishermen at their sides.

“I caught two catfish,” said a breathless Wilson, who, because of a birth defect called spina bifida, is in a wheelchair. “They were really heavy. They’ll slip right out of your hand, they’re so heavy. They probably weighed 10 and a half pounds each.”

Maybe not, laughed Austin’s mother Gerri W. Bradley, who attended the event with her husband, Jerry, and Austin’s brother, Dylan. “I think that's a little on the heavy side,” she joked with her son, but what's a fishing trip without a few tall fish tales?

Especially when the participants were getting advice on fishing — and fishing stories — from some of the best professional fishermen in the business, including Alabama’s Dalton Bobo, Clay Dyer and Troy Jens as well as local legends Kevin Tucker and Todd Gessner.

The getaway came about after resort owner John Reilly saw Brigid O’Donoghue, USSA president and founder, receive an Outdoor Youth Mentor award at a Chicago outdoors event.

O’Donoghue started the non-profit alliance to provide free hunting, fishing, camping or canoeing trips for terminally ill
or disabled children and adults. Since she started the organization, O’Donoghue has been able to fulfill more than 2,000 wishes.

“John was genuinely moved when he learned about her program,” said resort consultant Clark Gyure, who along with Reilly, Gessner, O’Donoghue and the resort’s Susan Joy, helped organize the event.

“As John put it, ‘It’s all about courage and giving and caring.’ The whole program embraces the human spirit and it certainly reminds you that you need to embrace life.”

Zach Allen is one of the participants who was at the resort to embrace life. The “almost 13-year-old” Allen has battled cancer since he was 4, said his mother, Nikki Allen of Pekin. Allen’s cancer started in his brain stem and spinal cord and has since spread to his bones and bone marrow. He was recently taken off chemotherapy and put on morphine in an attempt to quell the excruciating pain that accompanies his cancer.

“As I watched him today, I learned you can’t worry. You’ll ruin the moments when he is, what he calls, ‘living big’ — when he’s having one of his good days,” she said.

Zach said he was having a great time, especially with his guides, including Eric Halgren of Dixon.

“I want to be like him when I grow up,” Allen said. Halgren enjoyed the experience — the first USSA trip he has taken part in — but certainly not the last.

“Just spending time with Zach and seeing him when the rod went down was worth it. He was on it and so excited when he reeled in a fish. It’s an awesome feeling,” said Halgren, a member of the Professional Catfisherman Association.

Gessner, of Southern Outdoor Recreation Service in Whittington, agreed.

“Watching these kids as they catch a fish, whether it was a little, bitty bluegill or a big catfish, was really fun. You could see the excitement as they were getting on the boats. They were walking, or wheeling, right off the pavement to get on board,” he said.

Tucker, owner of Tucker Outfitters in Ewing, said he enjoyed the experience so much he is already trying to arrange a deer hunting trip for Allen. “Some of these kids don’t even know if they’ve got a tomorrow, so to have the opportunity to make these little guys happy is something else,” Tucker said.

The resort donated lodging, boats, bait and food for the event, while the fishermen donated their own time and travel expenses.

A Missouri donor gave trophies to reward all participants.

“This is 100 percent volunteer and everything is donated,” O’Donoghue said.

“Nobody ever says no. They all want to help.”

The professionals will even drop out of tournaments to attend one of O’Donoghue’s events, she said.

Also helping to give the organization a regular boost is the “John Boy & Billy Radio Network,” whose “Big Show” has helped find not only volunteers but also participants, including several that were at the resort getaway, O’Donoghue said.

“For a lot of these people, they are so sick, but they’re not sick when they come here,” she said.

“They’re used to being different but when they get here, they aren’t different. They become a real family.”

Participants arrived with their families Sunday night and spent most of the day Monday on the water.

They will leave the resort this morning after brunch.

For more information, visit USSA’s Web site at www.childswish.com.