Local organization grants outdoor wishes throughout the country

by Megan VerHelst
Reporter

She has granted an outdoor wish for nearly 5,000 children and adults throughout the nation, and Bridig O’Donoghue has no plans to stop anytime soon.

O’Donoghue, of rural Pittsville in Jackson County, started the United Special Sportsman Alliance out of her home in October 2000 after she helped to grant the wish of a critically ill man.

“I was very touched by it,” O’Donoghue said. “I thought since I had the connections, why don’t I get this off the ground and growing?”

So the USSA got its start. O’Donoghue wanted to start her not-for-profit organization so ill children and adults could have the opportunity to have an outdoor wish granted. The first wish USSA granted was to help a Wisconsin man go on a deer hunt.

Now it has grown into an organization that helps grant outdoor wishes to people all over the country. If a child or adult who has or has had a terminal illness wants to take part in activities ranging from hunting and fishing to water skiing or boating, O’Donoghue said it is USSA that can make the wish happen.

USSA has granted wishes in 33 states and is also only 17 people away from granting 5,000 wishes since its inception, and O’Donoghue said she hopes to hit the 5,000 mark by the end of the year. “That’s my dream and I’m going to do this,” she said.

The organization is completely run by volunteers and is funded through private donations and sponsorships. People who are having wishes granted do not pay a cent and everything is provided, O’Donoghue said. People interested in making an outdoor wish need only to contact USSA. People interested in donating land or resources to help wishes be fulfilled should do the same.

“I think people (in Jackson County) were looking for this outlet to help people in need and having this in their backyard has really been wonderful,” O’Donoghue said.

One of the best parts of being founder of USSA, O’Donoghue said, is accompanying kids on trips and seeing what it does for children to have their wishes granted. “When they are sick and hurting, to know something is lying ahead gives them hope and strength,” she said.

She said granting wishes for people also helps the volunteers involved. Right now, USSA has more donors than people who need wishes granted. “It helps them reflect on their own life,” she said. “It gives them a whole different direction and leaves you to walk away knowing you did good.”

One wish USSA granted recently was for 12-year-old Emily Phillip. Emily, of Oshkosh, had always wanted to go hunting with her dad, Joel, and it was USSA that helped her do that.

“I don’t get to do a lot of stuff with him,” she said. “I really wanted to do something with my dad and I thought this would be a good way.”

Gwynn Phillip, Emily’s mother, said they learned of USSA through a friend who had also gone through the organization. She said she and Joel always wanted to let Emily go hunting with Joel, but safety was a big issue. Due to Emily having life threatening congenital heart defects and pulmonary hypertension, she can only walk short distances or use a wheelchair. She also has a line connected to her that is constantly pumping medicine to her heart.

“It’s just not safe to go out and take her wherever,” Gwynn said. “(USSA) did it in 12-year-old Emily Phillip, second from left, is one of almost 5,000 individuals who have had an outdoor wish granted by USSA. She is pictured here with her family and her prize 12-point buck.