Local family’s gift of a bear hunt keeps on giving

By Kelly O’Day

When a recent ruling by the WI DNR to allow hunters to transfer their bear hunt tag to a youth aged 12-16 was coupled with a Merrill family’s offer to carry out a hunt, the joy it produced could only be gauged on an exponential scale.

Erik Peterson, of Muskegon, MI, has long dreamed of participating in a bear hunt, but complications from his genetic disease that have forced 28 surgeries since he has been eight years old have stood firmly in his path. But obstacles can be overcome with the help of caring people and several stepped up to the plate to make Erik’s dream come true.

His dad, Tom, contacted Brigid O’Donoghue of the United Special Sportsman Alliance to inquire about the possibility of a hunt.

O’Donoghue knew of a hunter that would pass on his tag despite the difficulty in obtaining one.

“About two years ago the WI Bear Hunters’ Ass’n. lobbied the DNR to make it possible to donate a tag to youth,” Merrill Chuckie O’Leary said. “Normally there’s a 7-8-year wait for a permit, so now anyone can donate to a person 12-16 so they don’t have to wait so long.”

Erik still needed help, since the tag donor did not offer to assist in a hunt.

“Brigid had spoken to our organization, and Tim (O’Leary) told her that if they ever needed someone to take a kid we’d be happy to do it,” Chuckie said.

Tim added, “We have five hounds and that’s all we do. July and August is when the hounds are up and in Sept. and Oct. we hunt. This year we didn’t have a permit, but because we have finished hounds, we don’t have any problem getting hunts.”

Chuckie said, “We really wanted to get him one but you don’t always get one.

“Both Erik and his dad were just thrilled when they saw that bear up a tree and (Erik) made a good shot. His mouth just never closed and his eyes were huge.

“It was just absolutely wonderful. It was the best hunting experience we’ve ever had.”

ERIK PETERSON, MUSKEGON, MI, experienced the thrill of a lifetime in a bear hunt assisted by local hunters. Peterson, standing on the truck bed next to his kill, is joined by (from left): Chuckie O’Leary, Tom Peterson (Erik’s dad), Tim O’Leary, Jonas Moermond and Roman Stienfest. Missing from photo were: Kelly Moermond and Brady O’Leary.