Reeling in a big dream

Thirteen special children, their families, and their guides arrived on Father’s Day around 4:00 p.m. at Rend Lake Resort in Illinois. They were all excited about the fishing they were about to experience.

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

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

If nothing else, Austin Wilson, one very special boy, will leave the Rend Lake Resort with one giant fish story. The six year old Metropolis boy was one of 13 disabled or seriously ill participants in the three day fishing event. He 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 1/2 pounds each!”

Maybe not, responded 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 laughed.

The participants were getting advice on fishing 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 who will even drop out of tournaments to attend one of O’Donoghue’s events.

Zach Allen is another one of the participants who was at the resort to embrace life. The twelve year old Allen has battled cancer since he was only four. Allen’s cancer started in his brain stem and spinal cord and has also now spread to his bones and bone marrow. He was recently taken off chemotherapy and put on morphine in an attempt to help with the terrible 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,” said Mom.

Zach said he was having a great time, especially with his guides, including Eric Halgren of Dixon, Illinois. “I want to be like him when I grow up,” Zach 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 recalled.

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

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

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