Nonprofit group helping children experience the outdoors

By Teresa Schmitt

PITTSVILLE — A few fishing rods, a pond stocked with fish and a group of heart-filled volunteers helped make about 30 disabled children’s dreams come true Saturday when the United Special Sportsmen Alliance organization sponsored a fishing event.

“Sharing the outdoor experience with these kids that they might not get because of health problems or because of financial reasons due to health issues is the most rewarding part of this day,” said Eric Badofsky, USA marketing communications director. “Seeing that sparkle in their eye after they catch a fish is wonderful.”

USA is a nonprofit organization that works with other organizations and families worldwide to help terminally ill or disabled children’s dreams come true. The group works with deer, elk, turkey, bear and pheasant farms to create outdoor experiences for children. Last year USA received $1 million in donations of free hunting trips including room and board.

Saturday’s fishing event was the fourth annual at USA headquarters.

“I sent a group of children out to Alabama to go fishing, and while they were there they called me and they were laughing and crying about the wonderful time they had,” said Brigid O’Donoghue, founder and president. “After hearing their joy I thought we should utilize the ponds on the property here so the children could fish here.”

The ponds were stocked by donation with walleye, catfish, bass and bluegills. It always will be fished as catch and release and will never be open to the public.

Professional fishermen throughout the Midwest volunteered their fishing skills to assist the children. “Disabled children can fish just as well as anyone else, they just need the opportunity and a helping hand,” said retired special education teacher Jack Freehill of Sault City, who volunteered as a fishing guide.

Mr. Freehill’s fishing buddy, Ryan Novy, 12, who has Down syndrome, reeled in a 12-inch walleye.

“Ever since I can remember he has been practicing the motions of fishing and reeling in a fish with his baseball bat or with a table knife,” said Ryan’s mother, Sheryl Novy. “We even have to watch every single fishing show on TV.”

Ryan did nothing but fish after arriving at the pond.

“It’s been great, Ryan’s really kept a good focus all day,” Mrs. Novy said. “Ryan’s father and I aren’t really outdoors people, so it’s wonderful for him to get a chance to do something like this.”

Byron Gunn, 6, caught a bass Saturday afternoon with the assistance of professional fisherman John Elliot of Omaha, Neb. United Special Sportsmen Alliance sponsored the Pittsville event for disabled children and their families.

Lake Holcombe fishing event set for Aug. 21-22

MENOMONIE — The Center Independent Living for Western Wisconsin will host the fifth annual Fishing Has No Boundaries Chippewa Chapter fishing event Saturday, Aug. 21, and Sunday, Aug. 22, at Paradise Shores Hotel Resort on Lake Holcombe.

The fishing is for individuals with or without disabilities and a person of any age may attend.

Guides, boats, pontoons, bait, fish cleaning, meals and emergency medical care are made available to each participant.

For more information, contact David Lato at (715) 233-1070 or lato@cilww.com.

7, also caught fish with the help of volunteers.

“This is pretty awesome,” said their great-aunt Kathy Souchard. “It’s something for them to do; it’s all we’ve heard about since we woke up this morning.”

The future looks good for the USA, Ms. O’Donoghue said. The group ranks as the No. 1 outdoor sports nonprofit organization.

Ms. O’Donoghue said their goal for next year is to make 1,000 children’s dreams come true. She said they’re hoping for 50 children in their families at next year’s fishing event.

“We need more kids,” she said.

“The more children that we can help to smile and be happy and be sick for a day the better.”

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