Sportsmen Alliance organizes outings for terminally ill, disabled

By Jonathan Gneiser
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The Pittsville-based United Special Sportsmen Alliance, which organizes hunting and fishing trips for terminally ill or disabled people, has a problem other nonprofit organizations dream about.

While others have waiting lists, USSA President Bridget O'Donoghue said she's struggling to find enough people to utilize the trips.

Within the past 14 months, O'Donoghue has connected 289 children with all expenses-paid hunting and fishing trips. The youths went hunting with a gun or crossbow for deer, elk, bear, coyote, wild boar, rabbit, raccoon, pheasant and turkey or went fresh water or deep-sea fishing.

"Kids treat me like I'm somebody famous," she said. "My heart is very soft for these kids."

One of those children was Jordan Lafler, 12, of Holmen, who was diagnosed with Ewing's sarcoma, a cancerous bone tumor, in July.

"It was really nice to get away from the hospitals and stuff for a while," he said.

Hunting is Jordan's favorite sport, he said.

"I just like hunting because our whole family does it, and I like eating the meat after I harvest it," he said. "I like making jerky."

In November, Jordan went to a shooting preserve in Oklahoma to hunt a 10-point whitetail deer, but it had been poached a few days before he arrived, said Gina Lafler, Jordan's mom. The preserve's owner took Jordan elk hunting instead, and he bagged a 600-pounder.

"The whole time we were down there, he was a complete little boy," she said. "When we got down there, he opened up and laughed and had such a good time. He let loose and forgot about his cancer."

After Jordan completes his daily radiation treatments and the weather improves, O'Donoghue has organized a tour at the Matter of Truth whitetail farm south of Marshfield.

Farm owner Laura Johnson said she and her husband, Tom, are looking forward to Jordan's visit.

"It was just a no-brainer," she said. "That's the minimum we can do. If he can spend an hour or two and brighten his day or add years to his life, so be it."

Johnson said she'll continue to work with O'Donoghue if other terminally ill or disabled children are interested in touring the farm.

While some of the preserve and ranch owners are nervous about hosting a terminally ill person, O'Donoghue said she reassures them there's no need to say or do anything differently.

The National Wild Turkey Federation has donated 36 turkey hunts in Wisconsin for this year, O'Donoghue said. Companies outside of the sporting industry have donated money to help with transportation costs.

"I've never had anybody deny us," said O'Donoghue, who added that she tries to schedule trips within 350 miles of where a person lives.

Jonathan Gneiser can be reached at 715-384-3131 or 800-967-2087, ext. 334, or at jonathan.gneiser@ctwnews.com.