Two friends, one happy reunion

by John Groth
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But throughout 19-year-old Cory's chest and blood stream, there runs a disease - one which he has lived with for over five years. He even knows the exact date of his diagnosis. On March 6, 2000, Cory was diagnosed with paroxysmal nocturnal hemoglobinuria (PNH), meaning that he has clone red blood cells which attack and kill his platelets and white blood cells causing him to have low blood counts. He must urinate the clone red cells out at night to keep his blood count up.

At one point, Cory was having to get platelets every other day and blood each week to help battle the disease. Then, a couple years ago, he had his spleen removed. Ever since, he's been a lot better. Though now, he's still looking for a bone marrow transplant.

"If I start bleeding it takes a long time to stop. So, I have to be careful," he said.

In 2001, Cory heard from a man named John Mozingo, who serves on the USSA's board of directors. Mozingo lives about 15 minutes from Cory and called him to ask him if he liked hunting. Then where and what kind of hunting he'd like to go on. Cory's choice ended up being elk hunting - and from there, Brigid O'Donoghue set everything up and made it happen.

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Then, in December of 2004, Cory met Justin Jackson. He and Jackson, a 15-year-old from Fort Worth, Texas, both went on the Texas deer hunt - and liked hunting together so much that they both met up again for a hog hunt, also in Texas. The two live four hours away from each other.

Justin, who was nine weeks premature, was diagnosed with cerebral palsy at birth.

"Part of my brain was bleeding and I had eye trouble. I still do to this day," he said.

Justin uses crutches to help him walk, but loves hunting and being able to explore nature.

"I try to get out, but most of the time I'm stuck at home. If it wasn't for Brigid, I wouldn't have ever met Cory or my friend Miles. I'd probably be sitting at home if it wasn't for her," he said. "I just like being able to experience the ability to hold a rifle and see white-tailed deer. They're one of the most beautiful animals I've ever seen."

The two boys even have a hunt planned together in Illinois sometime in November.

Lakeman knows all too well about these children's plights and frustrations. When they are diagnosed, the illness hinders and limits them.

"A lot of times what we find is that these children either spend so much time in the hospital and they don't get outside much. Their whole lives change once diagnosed with something," Lakeman said. "You see a lot of parents with kids that were playing sports - all that evaporates. Now you spend all your time going to doctors, hospitals, going to specialists. Then when you're home, you're quarantined because you don't want to endure any additional illnesses."

The illness becomes a routine. And the USSA and SCI were formed to get children out of that routine - to have them experience life, to understand nature and, most of all, to give them a chance to have fun.

The events also teach children about culture and customs, too. While in Cape, Alaska, Natives made the children paddles and bracelets, along with teaching them tribal customs.

"The whole town came out to greet us at the air strip. They were the nicest people I've ever met," Cory said.

Lakeman also believes that conservation is an important lesson for children to learn. And he believes it's important to give back - much like he, Brigid and other volunteers are doing for these children.

"Once you leave your manmade environment, and that's where a lot of stress in your life comes from, you step out here into the outdoors, which is God's world, you begin to get a little bit of a feel for actually how small you are on this planet," he said. "It gives you an opportunity to put a lot of that stress behind you. That's what kind of neat about coming here doing these kinds of things."

For people like Cory and Justin, the neat thing is that these events give them something to look forward to. And some friends and relationships that they'll never lose - or forget.
recent trip to Alaska for a bear hunt in June - where he stalked and killed a 300-pound black bear from between 20 to 25 yards away with a 7-magnum in one shot. "Brigid told us when we applied for the first time that she would keep Eric hunting," Carol said.

Doug added that O'Donoghue's not a pussycat when it comes to giving these children their hunting wishes. "She'll claw with her arms and legs and come out and win her battle. She's made his dreams come true that, probably as parents, we couldn't have done," he said.

According to Doug and Carol, there are many organizations willing to help Eric. He's traveled to Canada, provided by Hunt of a Lifetime - where he killed three caribou and went snow goose hunting. He's gone coon hunting in Benton, Ky., with Daryl Newton, who owns a world-champion coon hound named Silver Dollar Stone. Newton even gave Eric one of his coon hound's babies.

"There are even organizations (that) make phone calls to us," Carol said. "He doesn't turn them down. Eric jumps on every one of them."

"We take these kids and give them adventures and give them an opportunity for success. A lot of these kids hear a lot of negative things. That's what a lot people don't understand," Lakeman said. "You go to doctors and your blood's not doing well, your blood count's up, you better get your red count up, or we're having problems with this right here. So we're going to have to put you on another treatment. So all they hear are a lot of negative things in their life. So it's a complete change that takes place in a lot of these kids. What you want to do is give them something positive - some kind of experience where they can walk away and go 'geeze, I've succeeded in something'."

Eric's dream is to be a hunting guide. But for now, he's happy hunting, along with visiting and meeting the different people throughout the trips.