



Photos by Morgan Harper
Dads will do almost anything for a laugh, even while this family and fisherman are talking to USSA founder Brigid O'Donoghue for a video about the day of fishing they just had.

The fish were biting!

By Eliot Duke
Staff Writer

Southport welcomed some special guests last week for a special day of fishing on the open water.

The United Special Sportsman Alliance (USSA) hosted its sixth annual N.C. Deep Sea Fishing event on Aug. 4-5 for kids with permanent disabilities and life-threatening illnesses. USSA, a 501(c) nonprofit, provided two days of Southport hospitality for 35 families that included dinner and entertainment, lodging and chartered fishing trips followed by lunch.

"For a lot of the families here, this is their first time fishing," said USSA founder and organizer Brigid O'Donoghue. "This is an experience for the parents as well."

USSA describes itself as a "dream wish granting charity," that specializes in sending critically ill, disabled youth and disabled veterans on free outdoor adventures.

Families feel the generosity during event

The experience culminated on Friday morning as dozens of families climbed aboard 34 awaiting boats at Morningstar Marina, with captains eager to show their guests a good time filled with plenty of fish. Families participating in the event were treated to a welcoming dinner at the Southport Fire Station on Thursday evening that included motorcycles and an acrobatic show. USSA provided rooms at the Comfort Suite and gas cards to help families with rising fuel costs.

Alicia and Michael Alexander attended with their son, 13-year-old Michael, and couldn't believe the generosity after her family was accepted for this year's event. The gas card definitely helped with the drive down from Knightdale.

"I was like, 'You're going to pay for all of that, and a gas card?'" Alicia Alexander said. "That was amazing. It has been great."

O'Donoghue said she wants 2023 to be even bigger as she plans to have 50 boats involved next year.

Southport 'is ideal' for USSA fishing

When planning for the initial event six years ago, O'Donoghue went out looking for a location that could serve both Carolinas as well as Virginia. Once she stopped in Southport, O'Donoghue knew she had found the perfect spot.

"I was amazed at the comfort and kindness of the people," O'Donoghue said. "I was looking for the most perfect marina. I looked at where the families came from, and we had a lot from North and South Carolina and Virginia. Southport is ideal."

With her spot picked out, O'Donoghue set out to find captains who may be interested in getting involved. It turned out that she didn't have to look very far.

"I looked for captains who wanted to get on board, and it was one after another," said O'Donoghue. "Nobody said 'no.'"

This year was Holden Beach Captain Vonn Hall's first time participating in the event. Hall already does a lot of work with veterans, and said he looked forward to spending the day fishing with 13-year-old Tommy Abel. The two connected immediately and they came back to shore with some nice catches.

"A friend referred me (to USSA) and I'm hooked," said Hall. "This is phenomenal."

I could see his excitement," Hall said of Abel. "The further away we got from shore, the bigger his smile got. It was absolutely a great time and I definitely would do this again."

Abel was all smiles once he got back to shore, too, and more than eager to share his newfound responsibility. "I was fishing," Abel said happily. "I got to drive the boat."

'This has been a wonderful experience'

For many of the captains and volunteers, the event marked one of their favorite days of the year. Captain Cane Faircloth and his daughter and first mate, Bella, look forward to sharing their love of the water with their honored guests every year during the first weekend in August.

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The excitement was obvious as the kids and their families boarded the boats.



A fist bump to celebrate a good half-day of fishing.



Offshore fishing turned out to be lots of fun for many.



When the boat rocked a little too much for comfort, this fisherman and the family he was assigned hopped off and fished off the marina dock, catching their first fish within minutes of dropping in their lines.



The Napoli family shows off the Spanish Mackerel they caught Friday as their boat captain watches.

USSA fishing event fun for all involved

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“We’ve been doing this for a few years,” said Cane Faircloth, who brought two boats to the event on Friday. “We volunteer every year. This is a great experience, and it’s very rewarding.”

Willow Ferri learned one of the open seas’ most important lessons early on: how to tell a proper fish tale. Willow spoke highly of the shark she pulled into the boat, and how she managed it all by herself.

“It was fun, but we went fast,” Ferri said. “I talked on the radio and I caught a shark.”

Willow’s father, Chris Ferri, couldn’t help but smile.

“She’s already telling fish tales,” said Chris Ferri. “She had a wonderful time and this has been a wonderful experience. We caught some stingrays and flounder and yes, a shark.”

Captains put kids at ease

Southport residents Theresa and Bob Forge attended with their 11-year-old daughter, Mason, who

made the most of her first trip on a boat. Mason caught speckled trout, flounder and some groupers, showing off a natural knack for fishing.

“She loved every minute of it,” Mason’s mother Theresa Forge said. “She caught all the fish. This was awesome. Everything was perfect. It was more than you could ask for.”

“We would be honored to do this again.”

Rene Morrison and her son, Drew, wanted to attend last summer but an illness prevented them from making the trip down from Cary. When the chance came to re-apply for the event, Morrison wasted no time sending in her application. Morrison and her son were both excited about going fishing: “Drew woke up at six in the morning ready to go,” on Friday, she said.

She also talked about how Capt. Caleb Frink was “so good” with her son, and really helped Drew feel comfortable on the boat.

“(Frink) let Drew sit in the cap-

tain’s chair,” said Morrison. “He understands special needs children and he was so amazing.”

‘What they do is a level above’

Dean and Janice Window from Zebulon credited USSA with taking care of nearly every detail associated with the trip. Dean said Capt. Chad Shingleton and his son, Carson, created a very relaxed environment out on the ocean and that helped put their nine-year-old son Joel at ease.

“We had music playing on the boat, and Joel really loved it when we went fast,” Dean Window said. “We all caught some fish and he just loved the water.”

“What they do is a level above, and that really means a lot.”

Janice Window discovered the USSA through a Facebook group and asked Joel if he would like to go fishing.

“He said yes, so I sent in the application,” Janice Window said. “Capt. Chad was wonderful. He was like, ‘Whatever you guys want to do, let’s do it.’ “We had an amazing time.”



Singing was one thing this captain and his fishing partner found they had in common.



Fishermen can tell you that the sport can wear you out, as this new little fisherman found out Friday.



Many families, like this one, returned to shore with big bags of fish on ice and big smiles on their faces.

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