

PORTfolio



Photos by Morgan Harper

As they headed out in the rain Friday morning, passengers' and captains' faces were smiling with anticipation of the fish and the fun they were about to find.

When you wish upon a fish

By Caroline MacGregor
Staff writer

Families from five states gathered at the Southport Marina Friday for the North Carolina Sea Fishing Kids-Wish outing for children with disabilities and life threatening illnesses. The annual event is organized by the nonprofit charity United Special Sportsman Alliance (USSA) in cooperation with Southport Marina, area boat captains and local business sponsors.

The fishing expedition is just one of many dream-wish events the USSA plans each year to help provide critically ill and disabled youth and their families respite from a world of hospitals and high medical bills. USSA serves terminally ill and disabled people in 45 states, and facilitated wholly by volunteers, the nonprofit affords kids and their family members an outdoor adventure of a lifetime with help from donors that include preserve and campground owners, ranchers, fishing lodges and, in this case, 24 fishing boat owners.



Say cheese! O'Donoghue snaps a photo of a family and captain heading out for a morning of boating fun.

"I can't even tell you how amazing it was as we were going around and talking to the kids, they were so happy," said USSA founder and CEO Brigid O'Donoghue. "Even if they didn't catch a fish, they caught a memory and that is what was so great about it."

Off to a bumpy start

While last year's event was canceled because of COVID-19, O'Donoghue called this year's fishing trip "a resounding success."

The night before their adventure, all of the families gathered for a meet and greet at Southport Fire Department before sitting down to a special dinner with organizers and volunteers.

Up at the crack of dawn the next morning everyone headed out to the marina escorted by the Brunswick County Sheriff's Department and Southport Police deputies.

"Despite an initial bumpy start that morning attributed to a lack of cooperation from the weather, O'Donoghue remained confident in spite of the heavy rain that everything would go ahead as planned, as did the boat captains who lined the marina in anticipation of the arrival of their young passengers and their families.

"Everyone was a little concerned, but I wasn't. I told them it would be alright because it always turns out perfect," O'Donoghue said. "We have prayers all over the country for this event. We put our faith first and it always seems to be successful.

"It started out raining when we got out on the water but it cleared up," she stated. "We could see it all around us, but not on us."

Captain Kevin Harris of Winston Salem volunteered his boat, "Reel Hooker," for the event. "This is our fourth year doing it, and we absolutely love doing it," he said, clearly undeterred by the inclement weather that threatened to postpone the event. And he wasn't the only one who was fine with a little rain - or even a more than a little.

"Nah, the fish don't mind getting wet," he said, whose passengers included John Leon and his daughter Charlie, who suffers from autism.

Leon said his family had been closely watching the weather for two weeks prior to the event.

"These guys were very hospitable to us, they gave us some hats and t-shirts. Matt assured us the rain was going to move out and he was right," he said.

When their boat returned to the dock, Charlie was happily sporting a shiny Spanish Mackerel. "I'm going to eat him for dinner," she said.

'When they're on the boat they're just kids'

Accompanied by her mother Christina, Maddie Daniel joined captain Scott Blevins and his wife Sarah on their fishing boat *Sea Squirrel* and headed out. The group caught Atlantic croaker, Red Drum and trout.

"We had a really good time, we caught a lot of fish," said Blevins on their return. He has been instrumental in helping to organize the events locally for the past several years, and said it is his favorite day of the year.

The kids have a wide range of disabilities," Blevins said. "Some children, you look at them and wouldn't know anything was wrong but they could have cancer, or have learning or general physical disabilities.

"The coolest thing about the whole event is that when they're on the boat they're just kids," he said.



Maddie Daniel touches the fish she caught before Captain Scott Blevins returns it to the water to swim away. "We had a really good time," said Blevins.

He explained the organizers make an effort to match up children with specific needs to specific boats that have included in some instances installing special hooks to lift heavy mechanical wheelchairs into place.

"It takes a village," Blevins said. He expressed his and the other fishermen's gratitude to O'Donoghue for making it all happen ("She literally does this all over the country,") as well the city, the sheriff's department, fire department and the marina.

'This was our first time, it was awesome'

Robin Rose of Preston Development, Southport Marina's parent company was on hand that day to see the boats off and welcome them back. He helped establish Miracle League of the Triangle in the Raleigh-Cary-Wake area providing kids with special needs the opportunity to play baseball, and found a way to connect the two nonprofits.

"When this group brought their ideas to us about a place where they could have this function, we were all onboard," he said. "We were able to have seven slots for Miracle League of the Triangle so those families are here today."

One of those families included Jennifer Kolakowski and her daughter, nine-year-old McKenna Smith, who has Russell-Silver syndrome and Scoliosis - and who loves to give hugs.

"She brings joy wherever she goes," her mother explained.

"This was our first time, it was awesome, it's been a great day," said Kolakowski. "It was just such a wonderful event from the moment we stepped into the hotel.

"Everyone has been amazing, Brigid welcomed us with open arms," she added.

It was McKenna's first time fishing, and Holden Beach Captain Jim Anderson took McKenna and her mom out on his Tour H2O pontoon boat, which was the perfect fit for McKenna who recently had MAGEC growing rods fitted to her spine to help minimize the progression of her severe Scoliosis.

With a little help from her Captain, McKenna was able to catch 10 Atlantic croakers. "She was both thrilled and scared," her mother laughed.

Looks like next year is a go

Amanda Coughlin and her son Riley drove the nine hour trip from Pennsylvania to attend the fishing event. Ten-year-old Riley developed Leukemia when he was just a year old.



Twenty-four families headed down the Southport Marina dock to go deep sea fishing last Friday morning.

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Photos by Morgan Harper
 Nine-year-old McKenna Smith waves goodbye to Captain Jim Anderson. McKenna and her mother, Jennifer Kolalowski, spent the morning on Anderson's Tour H2O pontoon boat with McKenna catching Atlantic croakers.

USAA takes kids on the water

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He has since been declared cancer free. The family, who Coughlin said camps a lot so they do a lot of fishing, "but never deep sea fishing," heard about the fishing trip through the Kisses for Kyle Foundation, and were one of two fortunate families selected for the trip.

"It was amazing," Coughlin said. "Seriously, we would never have done anything like this, it was just an amazing experience."

"I got to drive the boat, Riley exclaimed, adding that he caught a "really big fish."

After the event the children and their families gathered for lunch at the marina where enforcement officers with the North Caroli-

na Wildlife Resources Commission handed out badges and bracelets and talked to the kids about an alligator that had been spotted in the river. The children also got to meet the Brunswick County Sheriff's Department's canine unit therapy dog "Boulder," whose friendly, easy-going temperament and wagging tail was a source of delight to the kids.

This was the first excursion USAA has held since the suspension of events due to COVID-19 in spring of 2020, and O'Donoghue says she is excited for next year's trip back to Southport. She hopes to try to shoot for 50 boats.

"We have the captains and we have the families," she said.



Sometimes you don't catch anything ... and other times you catch a King Mackerel like this family did. There were actually two King Mackerels brought in on two separate boats, as well as several Spanish Mackerels and other fish from the sea. Many elected to release their fish so they'd grow to be bigger, while some brought theirs in to be filleted by their captains so they could take them home.



After they arrived back at the marina, families were treated to lunch and had a chance to visit with North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission officers.



USAA founder Brigid O'Donoghue, pictured right, greets families and boat captains on their return from their fishing excursions. Before they all head out to sea, she takes group photos and has them developed while they are gone so that when they get back they can have a keepsake group photo of the experience.





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4	ReMax Southern Coast	30	\$11,413,900
5	Keller Williams	24	\$9,022,100

Source: Based on North Carolina Regional MLS Statistic

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