



## Wishing' for fishin'

Non-profit serves the terminally ill, disabled

By Renee Spencer  
Staff Writer

Eighteen years ago, Brigid O'Donoghue helped a man with advanced-stage pancreatic cancer fulfill his lifelong dream of going on a bear hunt. She flew the man and his best friend from Texas to Wisconsin. O'Donoghue accompanied them on the excursion. What she witnessed was truly indescribable.

"I had never really understood how the outdoors could be that touching for someone, or that they could find so much peace in the great outdoors the way he did," she said. "It just took my breath away. It just moved me in such a way—I can't explain it. So I thought, 'I'll do a little bit more of this.'"



Her drive to do "a little bit more" led her to establish the United Special Sportsman's Alliance (U.S.S.A.), an all-volunteer 501(c)(3) non-profit, wish-granting charity that helps critically ill and disabled youths and disabled veterans fulfill their dreams of an outdoor adventure. The organization has now granted more than 13,400 wishes to terminally ill adults and children across the United States.



Last Friday, the U.S.S.A. made its third annual trip to Southport Marina for a Child's Wish event, giving 24 families the opportunity to enjoy a day of sun and salt air. A few of the children returned from previous years, but for most, this was their first time.

Children on the fishing trip ranged from those who are battling cancer to those who are disabled

and those who have mitochondrial disease. Volunteers—including 27 boat captains—were there to ensure the children and their families had a day of fun.

One of the families was the Evaul family from Morrisville, North Carolina. They had the opportunity to go out with Holden Beach charter captain Cane Faircloth and his nine-year-old daughter Bella.

Parents Mark and Katharine Evaul said they were grateful for the opportunity to take their two sons—nine-year-old Liam and six-year-old Tory, for a day of fishing. The boys were pleased with their haul, which included 13 Spanish mackerel and 13 bluefish. But they said the coolest thing they reeled in—a shark—didn't get to come back with them.

"He was too big," explained Cane Faircloth. "He might have bitten somebody's hand off."

Because they were about to head back to Morrisville, the family gave the fish to members of the Southport

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Photos by Morgan Harper



# Child's Wish brought kids for a day of fishing for third year

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Fire Department who were on hand offering fire engine and ambulance demonstrations.

While Liam's favorite part of the trip was seeing the shark, his brother Tory enjoyed the boat ride.

"And when we got splashed," Tory added.

Liam said of the fish they brought to the dock, the Spanish were his favorite because of how smooth they were.

"They were kind of hard up here, though," he said, touching his nose.

"I guess that's their ... snout?" Katharine Evaul guessed.

She explained that for the family, this trip was like a vacation. Prior to Friday's fishing adventure, all the families spent the night at Comfort Suites, where volunteers treated them to a pizza party. Local motor-cycle enthusiast Dane Britt also stopped by to entertain the kids.

Katharine Evaul said that because the family was trying to raise funds to get a service dog for Liam, they hadn't had time to plan a family vacation.

"We were really fortunate to find out about this," she said. "We only heard about this about two weeks ago."

The Glisson family also



**U.S.A.A. founder Brigid O'Donoghue agrees with host Southport Marina that the local event could serve more families.**

enjoyed the trip. Gray Glisson, 10, isn't verbal, but his dad, Travis Glisson, said he thought Gray had a good time.

"He was more about the boat riding than the fishing," Travis said with a chuckle.

Because Gray has difficulty with his balance, Travis said people just assume that he's unable to do the things that many children enjoy.

"But really, he's able to do a lot of things that other kids are. But he's just not



**Lunch was provided at the marina for children, their families and boat captains after a morning of fishing.**

given the opportunities," he said.

The trip allowed Gray to get outdoors with his family, be around other children and just have fun.

Steve Tugwell of Farmville, North Carolina, serves as the U.S.S.A. state representative for North Carolina and South Carolina, and he says seeing children like Gray and Liam have fun is what it's all about. Tugwell has been involved with the organization for about 10 years. He initially got involved with U.S.S.A. because his best friend's daughter had a brain tumor.

"She passed away," Tugwell said. "Then after that, it was kind of like the U.S.S.A. stuff fell in my lap."

The man serving as the organization's state representative stepped down, and O'Donoghue turned to Tugwell. Initially, he turned her down.

"I said, 'I've got two little girls. I don't have time. I'm raising my family. I want to help, but I don't want to be state rep,'" he recalled.



**Face painting was an on-shore bonus provided by local volunteers.**

But four years ago, Tugwell had what many would call a 'change of heart.' After extensive heart surgery, he was confined to a chair for about six months.

"Then, God explained to me that I had a little more time than I thought," he said.

He noted that organizing events like last Friday's takes five to six months of work, but it's all worthwhile.

"When these kids start coming back in with these fish, and they're smiling, they're grinning and they're holding their fish, it's one of the most rewarding things you'll ever do," Tugwell said. "It's priceless. You just can't set a price on it."

Kathy Scheflen, of Southport, agrees. She initially got involved with the event when she was a member of a local civic organization. Now she works with a small group of volunteers and considers it "her baby." Scheflen and her volunteers—known as "Kathy's crew"—throw the pizza party for the kids, their families and the boat captains the night before the event. They also organize a picnic lunch after their day on the water.

"This is so dear to my heart," she said tearfully.



**The Southport Fire Department showed up with fire and rescue apparatus to the kids' delight.**

"My brother died of cancer, and I do this in honor of him."

She also contributes her time and energy because she understands what it's like to be a parent with a special-needs child. Her daughter was in a body cast for the first couple of years of her life. Though her daughter made a full recovery, Kathy can remember how difficult it was and wants to help not only the children, but their parents.

"I know how hard it is for them," she said.

O'Donoghue and Tugwell say it's people like Scheflen who make this event so special. It's also why they keep coming back to Southport. In addition to aesthetics and convenience, the city also is a giving community that embraces the event.

"This is one of the most beautiful marinas I've ever been in, and these are some of the most kind, generous people I've ever met," O'Donoghue said. "Their hearts are so huge, and the love they have for the families—you can just feel it right away. The families are just so moved by that."

She said Southport Marina also wants to see the event grow to serve 50 families, and U.S.S.A. is right there with them.

"This is definitely the right place," she said. "It's a win-win for everybody."

When it comes to the families who attended last Friday, O'Donoghue says many asked how they can help. She just asks them to "pay it forward."

"I just tell the families to let me know about another family I can grant a wish to," she said.

**To learn more about the organization or to nominate a family, visit [childwish.org](http://childwish.org).**

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**Steve Tugwell**  
U.S.A.A. state representative

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