

USSA ...

Fulfilling outdoor dreams for disabled, seriously ill children

By Dick Ellis

Undoubtedly, challenges that must be met before young hunters or anglers with disability or serious illness can participate in the field sports is often tedious and time consuming. Volunteers with the United Special Sportsman Alliance (USSA) though, don't look at the effort necessary to help kids play on the water or in the fields as work at all. In fact, retired Portage County Deputy Ken Tschudy has never quite seen anything like the "can-do" attitude that volunteers for USSA coordinating a turkey hunt in a small town north of Stevens Point for mostly young people with special needs displayed the first week in April.

"So often you hear why you can't do something, I was just so impressed with what this community of Junction City did," Tschudy said. "It's all can-do. There was no challenge too big to make sure that all these kids had a place to hunt and had the help and the equipment to do it. If they were short of something, people would find it. They took their time and made it work. It was really quite amazing to see."

The first organizational goal on the USSA website reads, "to grant children with life-threaten-



The United Special Sportsman Alliance specializes in sending critically ill and disabled youth on the outdoor adventures of their dreams. 17 young hunters participated in a USSA turkey hunt in early April at Junction City in north central Wisconsin.

ing illnesses, disabilities and challenged youth the outdoor adventure of their dreams." Adults with special needs also are welcome. The site also reads, "With our vision and goals firmly in sight, USSA takes aim at the numerous obstacles in the way of accomplishing these goals."

The USSA, according to turkey hunt event coordinator at Junction City and hunter education instructor John Haydock, those outdoor dreams might be

hunting or fishing excursions, camping, canoeing, or "any number of outdoor activities." The turkey hunt, he said, was scheduled one week prior to the Wisconsin statewide youth turkey hunt, prior to any of the six regular split season state turkey hunts, and coordinated within the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) "Learn to Hunt" program. That program requires a minimum of four hours of classroom instruction before new hunter

joins a mentor in the field on an actual hunt.

At Junction City, 17 would-be hunters fulfilled necessary classroom curriculum on Friday night, April 3rd prior to hunting all day Saturday and Sunday. One or two mentors depending on the individual challenges of the youth would also assist during the actual hunt. Hunters came from throughout Wisconsin including DePere, Menasha, Black River Falls, Baraboo, Spencer, Junction City, Vespers and Marshfield. Non-residents also came from Minnesota and Indiana.

Hunters Education instructors like Ken Tschudy and Jeff Jester of Amherst, who would ultimately pair in the field to assist a young woman severely visually impaired, were also asked to assist in helping to prepare the hunters on the shooting range prior to the actual hunt."

"It just sounded like a great opportunity to help kids that need it the most," said Tschudy, who also lends volunteer time to the Special Olympics. "I was asked to help by Larry Trelka, who owns property called the Pumpkin Patch where he plants pumpkins every year and opens his



17 youth with disabilities or serious illnesses tagged eight Toms and one Jake on a United Sportsman Alliance hunt with mentors near Junction City recently.



Mentor Jeff Jester called in a 23 pound Tom last week and 15 year old Bridget made the well placed shot during a United Special Sportsman Alliance turkey hunt.



The Pumpkin Patch owned by Larry Trelka proved the perfect USSA setting in early April.

land to the area school kids. They hold hunter education classes out there too. It's become Junction City's unofficial community center. He goes out of his way to make things a little special for the kids. But this whole community comes together and put together a fantastic hunt."

Very special needs demanded special considerations, innovative thinking and special attention to meet those needs. Tschudy mentioned "the Roth Brothers" for building a kind of steel Lazy Susan that would allow a wheelchair placed inside a blind to be turned to allow the disabled hunter to aim and shoot in response to the direction of an approaching gobbler.

When the number of hunters with special needs seeking to hunt with the group exceeded the number of available harvest permits, retired conservation officer Don Gruber made his game farm property available so that those youngsters could also hunt. Private property had already been secured from generous landowners to hunt wild birds, and special permission was solicited from the

Mead Wildlife Area also making public terrain available to the group.

Some of the disabled or ill hunters on the range were so weak that wheelchairs during practice session had to be specially rigged with, as one example, a rope through the trigger guard so that the hunter could use the leverage to gain the necessary strength to pull that trigger.

Hunters and their entire families were provided gas cards, meals and lodging to ensure that funding was not a hindrance to fulfilling the young person's dream. After the hunt, "more food than you could imagine", Tschudy said, live violin music by a local musicians, horse and buggy rides provided by Amish children, and tractor rides waited for participants.

"If you think you've had a bad day, just think about a kid who can't move a hand," Tschudy said. "They were so eager to try to do the best they could, and just so happy to be able to participate. Some of the kids' needs required two volunteers to carry in the wheelchair to the blind."

First time USSA volunteer

Jeff Jester, who with Tschudy would set up a blind and call the birds for Bridget, 15, liked the experience with children to deer camp camaraderie. Bridgett's brother with cerebral palsy also hunted, and Jester mentioned helping other children restricted to wheelchairs on the shooting line with severe challenges including muscular dystrophy.

"My nephew died of muscular dystrophy and that kid reminded me of him," Jester said. "He shot the gun and it hurt. He didn't shoot again. You hear that it's so good for your soul to help someone and that is kind of why I went. When you can not only help someone but help someone doing something that you love yourself like hunting it's a great experience. Johnny Haydock really does a nice job putting it all together. When it was over I told him that if he doesn't call me next year, I'll be calling him."

When it was all over, Jester had called in a big Tom. Bridgett had watched the sun rise, listened to sandhill cranes, heard her first gobbles, watched Tom go "chest to chest" with the decoy, and despite losing the stability of a shooting stick that

fell to the ground at the moment of truth, made a perfect shot with a 20 gauge on the 23 pound bird. When it was all over, Haydock said, eight Toms to 25 pounds and a Jake had been tagged, with four birds missed.

"It's not always a case of point and shoot," Haydock said. "Sometimes you have to adjust the wheelchair and line it up so that the kids have an opportunity to shoot. But the kids and families absolutely loved it. They are very appreciative and thankful. Without this organization and the people coming together they wouldn't have the opportunity. Some come from hunting families, but for others, it was the first time they fired a gun. We taught them to hunt."

So bring any and all challenges to the community and people of Junction City. Leave the skepticism at home. This is the USSA. Can do. Will do. As Haydock said...

"It's all about the kids."

Contact the USSA at www.childswish.com or 800-518-8019 or 715-884-2256. Address: 7864 Shotwell Rd., Pittsville, WI 54466. ^oW_o