

# O'Donoghue raises bars with Sportsman Alliance

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**Pittsville** - Brigid O'Donoghue says the idea came to her in church.

The Pittsville woman, who spent the last decade connecting thousands of sick children and disabled veterans with the outdoors, decided to expand the vision.

"Why not develop an outdoors program for children with incarcerated parents?" O'Donoghue, 47, remembers thinking during a 2011 service.

O'Donoghue is not one to deal in hypotheticals. When she says "Why not?" the conversation has a way of moving directly to "How many?" and "How soon?"

After she learned how precious a hunting trip was to a business associate with a life-threatening illness, O'Donoghue founded the United Special Sportsman Alliance in 2000.

The nonprofit, volunteer-run organization grants "outdoor wishes." It specializes in sending critically ill and disabled youth and military veterans on fishing and hunting trips.

Since 2000, the organization has run programs in 39 states and granted 7,800 wishes.

In June, USSA organized a Lake Michigan fishing outing with 42 boats; families came from six states.

O'Donoghue has developed a network of specialists, including guides and ranchers, medical aides and taxidermists, who provide their services for free.

"It's an awesome opportunity for us," said Russ Smith, a hunter who has hosted USSA events on his land near Hayward. "It brings us back to earth. Most of us are pretty spoiled with how we are able to live our lives. This fills a void for people like us looking for a way to help."

So O'Donoghue was not exactly starting anew with her initiative to help children with incarcerated parents.

She also had firsthand experience with such kids - the father of her two children had been imprisoned.

O'Donoghue, now in a different relationship and with two grown children, knew there was great potential to help.

As she learned since 2000, outdoor activities can be transformational.

"For a vet in a wheelchair or a kid who has only seen asphalt, the outdoors is like another world," O'Donoghue said.

A Milwaukee native, O'Donoghue was stricken with viral encephalitis as a youngster and suffered from seizures into her 20s.

The seizures caused memory lapses and a speech impediment; she barely graduated from St. Joan Antida High School in Milwaukee.

"It's no fun to feel ashamed, to feel different," said O'Donoghue. "That's a big part of why I want to help others facing tough situations."

Her quest to launch the new program faced a unique challenge: How to connect with the kids?

After many dead ends, her answer came from Bexar County Detention Ministries in San Antonio, Texas.

The ministry worked with just such a group of children.

O'Donoghue presented the game plan - a weekend of camping, fishing, archery, swimming, campfires, star gazing and horseback riding at a ranch in Nixon, Texas.

Bexar County officials and 18 children signed on.

The program - Outdoors Outreach - was born.

The event was held on property owned by Scott Trammell, 42, of Nixon and his family. Trammell had been involved with previous USSA events.

"It was 'go' from the first word," said Trammell, who works on pipeline construction. "Get 'em down here and we'll have a great time."

The ranch is about an hour from San Antonio.

Some kids came with grandparents, others with guardians. The children were ages 4 to 14.

"They all had the same first reaction," O'Donoghue said. "Oh my!"

Most of the kids had never been outside the city. None had been on a ranch.

One child asked if there was a pool. O'Donoghue said no, they'd be swimming in the pond.

"We all went in and got our hair wet and mud between our toes," O'Donoghue said. "The smiles told the story."

The kids were put to work shortly after arrival. Tents needed to be erected, wood needed to be stacked.

Trammell said they just had enough rules to ensure safety. Other than that, they let them be kids.

"One girl told me she'd never been out of her neighborhood," Trammell said. "She wondered how far she could see in the distance."

The event was held on Father's Day weekend, often a lonely time for kids with fathers behind bars.

"We found a different way to celebrate," O'Donoghue said.

The kids were connected with the natural world, learned new skills, overcame some fears and misconceptions.

At the end of the weekend, O'Donoghue said the kids asked two questions: Can they stay longer? When can they do it again?

Now it must be said there is no lack of programs that attempt to introduce people to the outdoors. Many, to be frank, amount to a fun experience for participants but are quickly forgotten and don't change behavior much less lives.

O'Donoghue has a plan. She wants Outreach Outdoors to provide ongoing mentorship to the children, including work toward career goals and job training.

"I want to keep the children from going to prison," O'Donoghue said. "That's my goal."

O'Donoghue plans to go national with it. Her sights are set on reaching 10,000 kids.

Don't bet against the Irishwoman with Milwaukee roots. She knows the power of the outdoors.

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