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ONE-OF-A-KIND DEER HUNT CELEBRATES CAMARADERIE, HUNTING EXPERIENCE

EARLHAM, Iowa – Roger Erpelding had always wanted to go hunting. For years, he listened to the hunting stories his brothers and brother-in-law would tell and wished he was along for the adventure. The 57-year-old Windsor Heights man, blind since birth, finally got his chance in 2006 when he shot a doe with the help of a guide during a special youth and disabled deer hunt, southeast of Earlham. It was one of his proudest moments when he served a grilled roast from that deer to his family for Christmas dinner.

The Whitetail Challenge is a doe-only deer hunt for youth and disabled hunters offered by Ron Mason Jr., and Steve and Penny Radakovich, who as partners operate North Branch Wildlife Group, a guide and outfitting business on 1,000 acres of their adjoining properties in Madison County. The area, which Mason Jr. says looks more like Montana than Iowa, has welcomed youth and disabled deer hunters on the last weekend of the special youth and disabled deer season since 2003.

Working with his guide Dave Hyler, who was shouldering and aiming the gun, Erpelding squeezed the trigger. Hyler called the organizers to say a deer was down, and volunteers were dispatched to track it down.

“It was happy times,” Erpelding said. “Dave was excited and I was excited. I had always wanted to hunt. It was wonderful to say this is something I did. It was my doing.” He participated in 2007, but did not harvest a deer.

Erpelding said if he is available, he will be there again. “I really enjoy it, I really do. You come out here and you don’t want to go home again. It’s a wonderful experience,” Erpelding said. He said he is so thankful for the event and that it is run so well. “Just top notch, they are A-plus. Can’t thank them enough. It’s just beyond words,” he said.

“... you need to live after you’re released”

Jim Kramer was an avid outdoors man who hunted all his life. Then his life changed forever when in 2000 the strong man with a booming voice from Windsor Heights found himself lying in a hospital bed after a motorcycle accident left him paralyzed from the chest down. He was about to be discharged, newly paralyzed and facing all kinds of new life challenges, when he met Dan Kleen.

Dan Kleen broke his neck diving into a pool 21 years ago and has been in a wheelchair ever since. During his nine month rehabilitation in the Younkers Rehabilitation Unit at Iowa Methodist Medical Center, a guy came in to talk to him out of the blue.

“It made an impact on me,” said Kleen, executive director of the Iowa Off Highway vehicle Association and president of the National Off Highway Vehicle Conservation Council. The hospital now calls Kleen on occasion to visit with patients and talk about their future.

“He said ‘you need to live after you’re released,’” Kramer said. Kramer had never met Kleen before but the two visited in the hospital and after his release, Kleen introduced him to Ron Mason Jr. They struck up a friendship and Kramer has been a part of every hunt and had bagged a deer each year except 2007.

He said he has been to other disabled hunter events, but this Whitetail Challenge is by far the best. All you have to do is get there, he said. The rest is taken care of. “You know who your guide is and are encouraged to talk to your guide ahead of time. You don’t have to worry about looking out of place, or where to go to the bathroom. Will they have food I can’t eat?” he said. “It’s nice to go to someplace and not be stared at; to hang with other people who understand what we go through. It’s great to go out there and know everything is covered. They don’t guarantee it, but I guarantee that when you show up, all your needs will be met in a relaxed, fun atmosphere.” The event means more than going hunting to Kramer. He sees the real value in networking with others and learning about the obstacles they have faced and how they overcame them. “You don’t learn anything at the hospital,” Kramer said. “I’ve learned 90 percent of what I know from other people like me at other events. It’s really about meeting the people.”

The event can pick up the participants even if they can’t actually partake in the hunt. Just seeing others who are doing it is rewarding, Mason Jr. said. The hunt started accepting youth hunters who have their father or other mentor serve as their guide.

Preparation key to event success

Work begins at least two months ahead of time. Organizers send out invitations, line up entertainment, recruit volunteers, set up deer blinds and assign teams of volunteers to work with hunters who are disabled or have limited mobility. The Whitetail Challenge begins accepting applications in July and all participants must submit an application. Information is available online at <http://www.millcreekranch.net> or by calling Mason Jr. at 515-834-9111. They have not really turned anyone down, he said.

It takes three or four volunteers for each disabled hunter to make the event happen, plus volunteers to cook and feed the hunters, volunteers and any family members along. In 2007, there were 60 volunteers for four youth and 12 handicap hunters. Mason Jr. said the group works hard to keep the cost down by holding fundraisers to help offset expenses. “It’s a lot of work, as you can imagine,” Mason, Jr. said. “It’s extremely rewarding. It’s the most rewarding thing I’ve ever done.”

There have been 65 participants in the hunt, including a boy who started as a shy 9-year-old in a heavy motorized chair who has shot three deer since the event began, as well as the 57-year-old Erpelding and just about everyone in between.

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