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Local Hunting Event Getting National Attention

Earlham, IA – For 6 years now, the Earlham based North Branch Wildlife Foundation has been hosting its annual Whitetail Challenge. The Whitetail Challenge is an organized Whitetail doe hunt that is specifically for youth and disabled hunters. Over the past 6 years, the hunt has hosted more than 60 hunters with disabilities ranging from chronic back pain and severe spinal injuries to hunters with muscular dystrophy and other degenerative diseases and believe it or not, blindness.

The 2008 Whitetail Challenge is being held on September 26th, 27th and 28th and will be based out of the Radakavoch Cattle Company barn; the hunting takes place on the old quarry land adjacent to Martin-Marietta. Each year over sixty volunteers have worked to enable disabled sportsman to overcome their limitations for one weekend and hunt the hills, ravines and thick wooded areas of central Iowa.

“... 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.

“I have been to other disabled hunter events, but this Whitetail Challenge is by far the best. All you have to do is get there, 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.”

More needs to be met

Over the years, many local Earlham business and hunters have been actively involved with the Whitetail Challenge. This involvement has been greatly appreciated; time, money and resources have been donated to make this hunt successful. More help is always needed though. 2008 looks to be the biggest hunt yet with nearly 20 handicapped hunters who have submitted applications. Many of these hunters do not have the finances to travel to the hunt, or to find

accommodations for the weekend, so sponsorships are needed. The cost to sponsor a hunter for the weekend is \$300, this will supply the hunter with food, lodging, and hunting license and all needs met for the weekend and each sponsor is invited to attend the hunt and meet the hunter they have sponsored. There are many in-kind donations that are needed for the weekend too. The Whitetail Challenge provides at least two guides and a driver for each hunter that is confined to a wheelchair. For those participants that are in motorized chairs weighing in excess of 300 pounds, additional guides are needed to assist with transporting the wheelchairs and getting them into hunt blinds.

If you or your business would be interested in sponsoring, or helping with the 2008 Whitetail Challenge, please contact Ron Mason Jr., at 515.834.9111 or you can get more information by logging on to www.wildlife.com

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