

Prison ministry helps bring joy to ailing children

By TROY ANTRIM JENS

BLACK RIVER FALLS — Usually, we place emphasis on ministering to those who are imprisoned while most of society really never sees the results. But in an increasingly broken world, sharing God's love with those who are incarcerated is becoming more important, especially when that love translates tangibly into acts that make a difference outside of the prison walls.

In February of 2009, Brigid O'Donoghue was attending a Mass held by Father John Steiner of St. Joseph Parish in Black River Falls. Brigid was with her friend, Pete Normington, who helps her run her special charity. Brigid is the founder and CEO of the United Special Sportsman Alliance (USSA). The USSA is a national all-volunteer outdoor wish-granting charity that provides wish-trips along with Christian ministry

to kids and families enduring the challenges of critical, life-threatening and chronic illness across the country.

During Mass, Father Steiner mentioned that the Church was looking for people to provide Catholic Prison Ministry. Brigid O'Donoghue and Pete Normington felt the special calling in their heart, and answered that call when they volunteered to become involved.

Initially, Brigid was nervous; she had never done any prison ministry before and didn't know if she was educated enough to help minister to this special group of people. She felt however, that she could work well with her friend Pete, and that God would lead them accordingly.

Brigid and Pete began their ministry at the Jackson Correctional Institution (JCI) in Black River Falls. During a visit to the JCI in July 2009 Brigid men-

tioned that she ran a charity for special kids. This sparked the interest of some of the inmates. One of the inmates spoke up and said that the prisoners made teddy bears, blankets, knapsacks and crocheted hats for people with cancer who have lost their hair.

Some of the prisoners became excited, stating that they wish they had a way to become involved in helping the kids and families of the USSA charity. Brigid explained to them that in a week, the USSA would be holding its annual summer camp for these kids, and that she would like to have some of the items made by the inmates for the kids. Many of these children are stricken with cancer and other critical illnesses, and the gifts would help bring happiness to their lives.

Brigid made the connection with Eilene Miller, the recreational director for JCI. Eilene headed up the project, and cleared the path so that the gifts could be made and then given to the kids at the USSA Summerfest.

With only that one week notice, the inmates got to work, and they produced many items to be handed out to the children. The effort was a great success, the mothers and grandmothers of the children handed out the gifts made by the inmates to the kids at the camp. The children were excited to receive the gifts, and especially the crocheted hats. In an unusual twist to the Summerfest event, the weather turned very cool after a passing front. The normal 80-plus degree temperatures had been slashed to highs in the 60s, and the kids were glad to have warm hats to wear during their outdoor events.

Brigid and Pete continued their prison ministry, and this past summer the inmates were again ready to produce items for the kids at the outdoor USSA Summerfest camp. Brigid had another idea for this year's event. She told the inmates at JCI that she had a number of disabled/wounded American soldiers attending, and she would like to have them hand out items they made for the children. This inspired even more hope with inmates, as some of them in the prison were also veterans of American armed forces.

The inmates of JCI got to work, and when Brigid came to pick up the gifts they had made, she filled her SUV to the very top.

"It was breathtaking," O'Donoghue said. "I watched the faces of the children as the gifts were handed out to them by some of our wounded vet-



CT/Contributed photo
U.S. Military veterans Chris Walport (left) and Raymond Hubbard, who were both injured while serving their country in Iraq, pose with a child who participated at the 2010 United Special Sportsman Alliance Summerfest. Walport and Hubbard were among a group of wounded and disabled veterans who handed out teddy bears, blankets and crocheted hats made and donated by inmates at the Jackson Correctional Institution, Black River Falls, to the children facing critical, life-threatening and chronic illness who participated in the event.



CT/Contributed photo
A participant at the 2010 United Special Sportsman Alliance Summerfest gives a thumbs-up after receiving a teddy bear at the event.

erans — gifts made by those suffering for society, given by those who suffer for our country and given to those who are suffering from illness, disease, disability and chronic medical conditions."

In December 2009, Brigid heard that there was an inner-city school where the poorer kids didn't have hats and mittens. The children were not able to go out for recess due to the weather conditions. She called JCI, which had already given a lot of the items they made away. But they had 50 sets of hats and mittens left. That was the exact number of warm clothing items that Brigid needed for the kids.

"I count that as God's hand moving for our need," she said.

Prison ministry is not only about bringing salvation to incarcerated souls; it is also about relinquishing the judgmental nature in all of our hearts, for in some manner we all share bondage in sin no matter where we are.

Brigid O'Donoghue and Pete Normington have hope that an-

swering the call to prison ministry will help open doors for inmates to find their own self-growth through giving, while finding salvation in Jesus Christ.

"It would be great if all inmates could find some sense of peace by giving to these special children," she said.

Brigid and Pete hope their ministry can lead to many other prisoners becoming involved in the USSA program around the country.

"It is important for people to become involved in some manner, if they have items like yarn, thread, sewing materials or anything that can be used by the prisoners for making products, they should contact their local correctional institutes or prisons and find out if they can donate to them," she said. "It is a very worthwhile cause."

To learn more about the United Special Sportsman Alliance, visit childswish.com.

Editor's note: Troy Antrim Jens is a past member of the board of directors of the United Special Sportsman Alliance.