

THE RIGHT TO BEAR HUGS



WORDS BY LOYD MCINTOSH

In the fall of 2001, Jim Hardy, an avid outdoorsman, was high above the ground perched in a tree stand on his family's farm when the structure gave way.

Jim, then a 24-year-old student at Auburn University and in the prime of his life, fell 22 feet to the earth below, landing on top of a piece of metal that held the stand to the tree. The impact from the fall severely damaged the T8 vertebrae in Jim's neck and caused other serious internal injuries.

Fortunately, Jim was hunting with a friend and was able to get medical attention quickly. He spent the next 60 days in the hospital, more than 40 of them in intensive care. Now paralyzed from the waist down and confined to a wheelchair, Jim's road to recovery was only just beginning. Jim was determined to find a way to continue hunting and fishing. "I spent those 60 days trying to get better, but I realized that things were going to change for me a little bit as far as getting outdoors," Jim says.

"I started thinking, 'There are a lot of children and young adults going through the same thing—wouldn't it be cool to get them into the outdoors as well?'"

He initially approached the leadership of Easterseals Camp ASCCA, a camp on Lake Martin that provides therapeutic recreation to children and adults with special needs, with the idea of establishing a program providing outdoor education and experiences to those with physical and other disabilities. It wasn't long before he got the program up and running. However, Jim's idea proved to be so popular that it quickly outgrew Camp ASCCA's facilities, spurring Jim to explore opportunities for expanding the program offsite to areas around the state. "So many people were behind it, so many trying to get involved, so many landowners

and other people who just wanted to be part of it," says Jim.

Insurance guidelines and other regulations meant that in order to expand the program and meet the ever-growing demand, Jim would have to strike out on his own. So, in 2010, Jim founded Outdoor Friends Forever, a nonprofit organization with the goal of providing outdoor opportunities to people with special needs. The mission statement is simple: "Pair people with special needs with people of special talents to form a bond in the outdoors that lasts forever."

As a motivational speaker, Jim addresses crowds of students and congregations, which provides him the opportunity to tell his story to thousands of people throughout the southeast United States. At every engagement, he discusses the looks on the faces of the children and young adults experiencing hunting and fishing for the first time. "You can't really put into words what something means to somebody until they get into that environment and see how much they enjoy it," Jim says.

"We've had so many children who didn't even think they could cast a rod but who are casting fishing rods now, and children who have never caught a fish in their lives catching them—and now they've been fishing for four or five years," he adds. "We've had children who have never been on a deer hunt get in the woods and see their first deer. Their little hearts start racing, and they're just, like, 'Oh my God, I've got to keep doing this!'"

Outdoor Friends Forever volunteers not only strive to provide great hunting and fishing experiences, they equip families with

the knowledge and skills needed to make experiencing the outdoors a regular part of their lives. Through events such as family hunting and fishing weekends, Outdoor Friends Forever helps those with special needs develop ways to hunt and fish on their own, while teaching their family members how to encourage their child to develop his or her skills.

“Our group wants to impart these skills on families that have a child with special needs so that they can know how to do it like we do it,” Jim says. “When they go back home, they can keep doing it.”

Volunteers work with each individual to find the best solution to accommodate each specific challenge. For instance, for those with no or limited use of their hands, volunteers instruct the individual and family how to use an attachment that allows them to blow into a tube to fire the gun. The goal, Jim says, is to give families with a special needs child the chance to enjoy an activity together. “We run into so many families that have two children who are just jumping around, playing softball, baseball, or basketball, but then they’ll have a special child who just sits on the

sidelines and watches brother or sister play all the sports,” Jim adds. “We want those children to have something of their own.”

Since founding Outdoor Friends Forever, many of the young men and women Jim has worked with have not only continued to enjoy the outdoors, but they are now giving their time, talent, and energy to help others. After establishing the nonprofit in order to inspire others, Jim, a deeply spiritual man, says it’s these young people who have inspired him instead.

“I truly believe we’ve got it completely wrong when we call them ‘special needs kids,’” says Jim. Since the program’s inception, many of the young people who have been introduced to the outdoors have continued to hunt and fish. And some, says Jim, have become inspired to help others with special needs, raising money to purchase all-terrain wheelchairs and other equipment to help provide access to outdoor recreation for people with similar disabilities.

“To me,” he adds, “this is one of the most amazing things—to see kids that were just trying to get outdoors, and now they’re raising money and doing their own thing.” □



“WE WANT THOSE CHILDREN TO HAVE SOMETHING OF THEIR OWN.”