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House Fish, Wildlife and Parks Committee • Jan. 25, 2005
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Danny's Dream Hunt • by Mark Flatt and Chris Whitman

Hunting and fishing guides are accustomed to meeting people from all walks of life. Although every trip is an individual experience, some unforgettable ones surprise us with their powerful lessons. Unique circumstances can bring people to our backyard that can unexpectedly inspire us.

Danny Adams was a strong-headed yet soft-spoken eighth grader from Phoenix Arizona with an easy smile that seemed to stick around for a while even after it faded away. He was often endearingly argumentative, revealing a sharp mind.

Tragically, at just 13, Danny was suddenly and inexplicably diagnosed with a deadly cancer. The awkwardness of his sudden voice fluctuations and the social calamities of adolescence had been swept away, buried under a cloud of chemotherapy treatments and unanswerable questions.

His cancer was a rare and extremely aggressive form of osteosarcoma and the prognosis was not good. Even with the best medical care, Danny's family felt absolutely helpless. In late August, a few months after the diagnosis, Danny told his uncle Chris Whitman that he would really like to go elk hunting with his dad. Chris knew this was something he needed to try to do for Danny and there was no time to waste. He went down to the Arizona Game and Fish and asked if an elk permit was possible for Danny.

They told him that there was nothing they could do. The drawings were over and it was just too late to try to get Danny a tag for this year. A stranger in line had overheard and suggested Chris call Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks where he heard hunters can get an elk license if they book with an outfitter. Chris contacted FWP's Hank Warsech on Friday, August 29th, and was told the timing was tight. Chris was calling just a few days before the outfitter sponsored license deadline on September 2nd. Chris would need to find and book with an outfitter quickly to secure a Montana elk license for Danny.

But how do you find and book with a good Montana outfitter on such short notice? Do you just pull one off the internet and hope for the best? Hank suggested Chris call the Montana Outfitters and Guides Association in Helena.

Chris got a hold of MOGA executive director Russ Copeland and explained the situation. "I remember Chris asked me what a trip for three hunters like this might cost, but then quickly told me he didn't care, he was going to do this for Danny and Danny's dad. He would just put it on his credit cards and pay it off forever if necessary." Russ recalls.

Then Chris told Russ that Danny was already in tough shape from chemotherapy, that walking and even horseback riding might be out of the question for him in another month or so. To top it off it was already late in the season when most outfitters are booked up.

After getting the details, Russ put out an e-mail to some 200 MOGA outfitter members asking for their help and suggested Chris call Safari Club International (SCI) in Tucson, which also might be able to help fund the hunting trip. Chris then called SCI. Within an hour, they reassured Chris that SCI would find a chapter who would help underwrite Danny's hunt.

Jeryl Williams, owner of WW Outfitters in Darby, Montana received the MOGA e-mail on his computer and immediately responded with an offer to donate guided hunts and the accommodations for Danny, Chris and Danny's father, Dan Adams.

"I was drawn by my own personal feelings of wanting to help this kid realize his dream." Jeryl reflected.

After the hunting trip was over, Jeryl shipped one of his own whitetail buck mounts Danny had admired in his den down to Arizona as his special gift to the boy.

Jeff Rennaker, one of Danny's guides, mounted the whitetail doe Danny had shot and sent it to Dan Adams, while Chris stayed a couple of days longer to hunt for a mule deer. Chris took a nice buck in eastern Montana and had the antlers and cape sent to Gavin Wellers of Wellers Wildlife in Tucson Arizona.

Chris explained, "Mr. Wellers donated the mount and had it completed in record time so that it could be presented to Dan and Danny at a banquet we threw for everyone involved in the hunt. All three mounts are hanging in Dan's house along with plenty of pictures to remind us of Danny's hunt."

Eventually, the chemotherapy proved to be ineffectual in stopping the spread of Danny's cancer.

"Danny had tears in his eyes when the doctors told him that the cancer spread throughout his body and he wasn't going to make it," according to Chris, "but he nodded his head as if he already knew."

Danny passed away peacefully in his sleep Friday, January 9, 2004. He was on a trip to Disneyland with his family.

Just days before Danny's funeral, Chris wrote: "Danny went on this hunt and was able to enjoy every moment of it. I enjoyed it also but I received a very special gift from Danny.

Not only did my faith in God grow, but also my faith in humanity. Ask for help and you shall receive, where have I heard that before? I learned that it isn't the money that's important but it's the desire to do God's work that counts.

I also learned that I am not the only one with that desire and that people do have some good left in them. This world has hardened most of us and it sometimes takes a boy dying of cancer to bring out the good in us. Maybe that is why cancer exists? Maybe cancer would go away if we all decided to love one another as God loves us?

I bet Danny has the answers. He always did!"

"I have also lost close friends to cancer."

Chris then heard from several other Montana outfitters who offered to sponsor the trip in some capacity and called back to tell Russ, "If all the people in Montana are this nice, I'm going to move up there!" Amazingly, just two days after Danny told his uncle he wanted to go hunting, the arraignments had fallen into place. Danny was going elk hunting in Montana!

SCI's Phoenix Chapter President Shane O'Dell responded and called a local board meeting. The Phoenix chapter decided on the spot to make Danny their first "Wish Kid". They also made Dan and Danny Adams honorary SCI members. Shane then set up a meeting between Danny, his family and some members of SCI/Phoenix Chapter at a local steakhouse in Phoenix.

Shane had informed Danny and his family that they would like to sponsor Danny as their first "Wish Kid". They had \$2,750 to donate towards Danny's trip.

"I was overwhelmed with all the support I was getting from people we had never even met before" Chris recalls. "During that meeting the members of SCI showed us what kind of people that organization is made of."

One member, Brad Freitag, ask Chris if Danny needed anything for the trip. Chris explained to everyone how the Sportsman's Warehouse in Phoenix had pretty much outfitted Danny from head to toe, but there was one thing.

Danny desperately needed a new rifle scope. Brad didn't even hesitate and reached into his pocket and handed Chris one hundred dollars to put towards the new scope. Four other members of SCI then matched Brads gesture, all of a sudden Chris had \$500 to put towards Danny's new rifle scope.

John Larson, manager of Phoenix Sportsman's Warehouse jumped up and told Chris to "bring that \$500 down to my store for a new scope and I'll match it!"

"That was a truly special moment" recalls Chris. "I practically started weeping with joy. I thought this trip was going to cost me an arm and a leg and now it looks like most of our expenses would be covered."

It seemed that everyone who heard about the trip wanted to contribute somehow.

"This trip made a huge difference to Danny." Chris explained, "He had some thing to work for, some thing to get strong for and he did just that. It was one of the miracles I witnessed as a result of this trip

As their departure date neared, Danny became more and more excited, and could hardly sit still. Danny was the first to be packed and out the front door for the airport.

"We could barely keep him in the house," recalls Dan. "When they made the boarding call at the airport, I couldn't recall the last time I'd seen him move that fast."

"The accommodations at Jeryl's hunting lodge in Montana were just great." Chris reported. "A beautiful, unforgettable setting in the mountains. But the food...every meal was just fantastic. I'm used to weight on my hunting trips, but on this one I think we all gained 10 pounds!"

Danny shot his first elk a few days later after with a clean shot just behind its shoulder. He drop crutches and sprinted toward the cow in a moment of triumph.

"The best thing about the trip was seeing the happiness on Danny's face after he shot that elk, said. "That was the best feeling in the world seeing him throw down his crutches, forget how sick and literally run after that elk. That really did it for me, and made the entire trip worthwhile."

Another good shot from Danny brought down a whitetail doe after Danny insisted on holding it the very last hour on the last day.