

Semple Foundation for Hope: 'Not just a name'

October 14, 2010 by **Dave Spratt**

Cindy Shinabarker never thought she would hear those words from her son.

"I shot a big buck."

Not since age 7, when surgery for a blood clot went horribly wrong and left Alex Choly paralyzed on one side. Not after a series of strokes took away Alex's ability to speak clearly.

"All by myself."

Autumn after autumn Alex, now 18, sat home in his wheelchair while his stepdad Curtis Shinabarker and three brothers hit the woods for deer season. All those years, Alex could only listen to their stories. But not this year.

"I shot a big buck all by myself."

"He must have said it 20 times," Cindy Shinabarker said.

Alex, of Brighton, shot that beautiful eight-point whitetail buck and fulfilled his lifelong dream with the help of the Tony Semple Foundation for Hope, an organization that arranges hunting trips for young people with terminal illnesses and extreme disabilities such as Alex's paralysis. This year the group organized two hunting camps in northern Michigan, one at Valhalla Ranch near Grayling and another at the Muy Grande Ranch near Millersburg.

See all the camper's trophies [here](#)

For a long weekend, each young hunter's special needs are

completely accommodated to make sure that for at least a few days he or she can live the outdoor life to full effect. This year, nine kids between the ages of 10 and 21 went to deer camp through the Foundation and experienced hunting for themselves. Two more were accepted but became too ill to attend.

“This has been the thrill of a lifetime for Alex,” Cindy Shinabarker said. “I just can’t say enough about these people. And it hasn’t just been the hunting. Alex has really bonded with them. We have made some great friends here.”

The Tony Semple Foundation for Hope was founded five years ago by Craig Mortz, a Michigan businessman, and former Detroit Lion Tony Semple. When Semple was still playing in the National Football League, Mortz was arranging private hunting trips for challenged young people on his own. Semple, his friend, would help out when he could.

“Tony would come to camps as a role model, and when he retired he said ‘We’ve got to take this to the next step,’ so we turned it into a 501c non-profit and now the sky’s the limit,” Mortz said. “We’re pretty proud of what we’re doing.”

The Tony Semple Foundation for Hope has held camps in Wisconsin, Missouri and Pennsylvania in addition to two camps annually in Michigan. Football stars like Brett Favre, Adam Timmerman and Jeff Hartings, another former Lion, have participated. The NFL sponsors hundreds of charities, and the Tony Semple Foundation is one of its top five grant recipients. Last year the Foundation was named the National Football League Player Association’s Charity of the Year.

That kind of financial support also comes from the Detroit Lions, which means that Semple can turn Foundation volunteers loose on the critical job of drumming up campers rather than chasing after money.

“When people ask me what they can do to get involved, I just ask them to find us kids,” Semple said. “Leave the legwork of finding funds up to me. When we talk about interviews and media support, it is 100 percent based on educating the community on what this program is and what it does, so they can spread the word and get more kids into this program.”

The Semple Foundation goes all out in providing campers who spend much of their lives in doctor’s office and hospitals with an authentic, all-expenses-paid outdoor experience.

Each hunter is outfitted with plenty of gear, including camouflage clothing, binoculars, backpacks and hunting knives donated by the Foundation’s many sponsors. Their physical limitations are overcome by whatever means necessary, from technology to muscle power to an overall attitude that focuses on what the campers can do rather than on what they can’t.

“There isn’t any sitting around and feeling sorry for each other,” said Foundation board member Mike Leonard of Chelsea, Mich.

Successful hunters, which is to say all the hunters, have their venison processed and packaged, and their deer heads mounted by a taxidermist. By day they hunt, and in the evenings they share their stories and fellowship around a campfire.

“That’s what we try to do with each camp, make sure there’s a life lesson, a learning lesson, and try to incorporate our faith into these camps,” Semple said. “What’s awesome is their inner strength and how they impact people around them. Half of them already know they have a special place in the world and how their lives are changing others.”

Mortz said both he and Semple grew up in the outdoors and have come to appreciate the unity with nature that comes from sitting in the

woods and having a squirrel run up your leg or a bird land on your shoulder, things that many able-bodied hunters take for granted.

“That’s the same rejuvenation of spirit that we try to give to these kids and their families,” Mortz said. “They spend every waking hour in the hospital, getting poked and prodded, sleeping in a crappy hospital bed, taking drugs that would kill a horse. To pull them out of that enclosure and say ‘Hey, immerse yourself in the outdoors,’ shooting a deer is almost anticlimactic. It’s very humbling. ‘Foundation for Hope’ is not just a name.”

Shinabarker said she didn’t know what to expect from this year’s hunt, given the difficulty of putting a wheelchair in the woods. Her concern grew even more when the camp staff had trouble helping Alex sight in his rifle, because no one but Alex could see what he was looking at through the scope.

That’s when the foundation broke out the “Liberator” – and Shinabarker saw for herself how hard the Foundation would work to help Alex get his buck. The Liberator is essentially a rifle mounted on a platform that uses high-end electronics and an LED screen to help the hunter aim. The trigger pull can be controlled with a joystick or even a sip-and-puff device.

Using the Liberator, Alex put the crosshairs on his buck and fired. The buck dropped, and Alex wanted to enjoy the same moment of triumph he’d heard about for years from his dad and brothers. He wanted to walk up to his buck. What Shinabarker saw next brought tears to her eyes.

“There was no hesitation,” she said. “Just two big guys came forward, one on each arm, and stood him up and walked him to his deer.”

Such celebrations were shared by eight other hunters through the Foundation this year: Cody Hunt, 14, of Remus, Mich.; Nathaniel Jaeger, 10, of Norton Shores, Mich. ; Austin Miller, 18, of Ossian,

Ind., all joined Alex at Muy Grande. Hunting this year at Valhalla were John Paul Montgomery, 21, of Pell City, Ala.; Addy York, 17, of Cookeville, Tenn.; Caleb Stallings, 16, of Ringgold, Ga.; Zack Buffington, 13, of Gillsville, Ga.; and Lane Milliken, 14, of Indian Mound, Tenn.

Austin Miller, 18, of Ossian, Ind., saw several large bucks during his hunt at Muy Grande before he picked out a nice 8-point Sept. 10.

“I was pumped,” said Miller, who suffers from cerebral palsy. “It’s my biggest buck and I was very excited. Then we got back to camp and celebrated and I got even more excited.”

Mortz said working with terminally ill and disabled children is at times heartbreaking and at times uplifting. Some of the campers haven’t much time to live. Those who do face a lifetime of struggle. But in the end, uplifting carries the day, Mortz said.

“It’s an emotional roller coaster,” he said. “Some of our kids go back, their cancers go into remission and they may live perfectly healthy lives. Then we have kids that will never see a normal life, and others who will succumb. That part is heartbreaking, but we forge ahead knowing that for that brief time we impacted their lives and impacted their family’s lives. And that is pretty powerful.

“When you have a child pass away and the parents tell you that ‘every day Mike told us he wanted to stay alive because of what you guys did,’ wow. We just took them hunting.”