

# A DREAM COME TRUE

## Providing Outdoor Trips for Critically Ill Children

The morning was gray, drizzly and cold. But even adverse weather couldn't dampen 10-year-old Ryan Welch's excitement as he and Ronnie "Cuz" Strickland hiked across the wet, grassy pasture toward a stand of post oaks.

After hunkering down against a sturdy oak, the pair, both clad in camouflage, sat as still as rocks. Cupping a hand around a tube call in his mouth, Strickland, the producer of Mossy Oak's television outdoors show, "Hunting the Country," let out one loud, long yelp. Within seconds, a turkey gobbled from somewhere in the thick brush. Soon several of the elusive birds strutted across the field. It wasn't long before the youngster had his first turkey.

The weekend hunt last April in Texas with Strickland was a dream come true for Ryan, a cancer survivor who still copes with the aftermath of two brain surgeries. The unforgettable trip with his father and 5-year-old brother, Riley, was sponsored by Catch-A-Dream, a program that grants outdoor wishes to children with life-threatening illnesses.

"The title is right on the money because he caught his dream," said Ryan's dad Roger Welch. "And being with Cuz, who's a TV celebrity at our house, was the cherry on the sundae. Ryan's also learning how to call turkeys and learning about their habitat, too."

Catch-A-Dream, established in 2000, memorializes Outdoor Life magazine writer and field editor, Bruce Brady Sr. of Mississippi, who succumbed to cancer the same year. The program is jointly administered by the Mississippi State University Extension Service, the Mississippi Wildlife Federation and the Mississippi 4-H Club Foundation. Other partners, such as Mossy Oak, private donors and hunting lodges across the country, also support the program.

Like most landowners who become involved with Catch-A-Dream, rancher Brent Hackley was quick to respond when Strickland called and asked him to host Ryan's turkey hunt. "If there's anything we can do to help brighten others' lives, especially children's, we'll do it," said Hackley, the sixth generation of his family to run the 15,000-acre Richards Ranch, located north-

west of Fort Worth. "We especially want to promote hunting and that heritage. Plus, one of the joys of having land is being able to share it."

The Hackleys hosted Ryan and his family along with Strickland, two videographers and Cliff Covington, a Catch-A-Dream board member, for three nights at their guest lodge. The group shared home-cooked meals prepared by Hackley's mother Charlotte, swapped hunting stories around the fireplace and played a few rounds of cards. The first evening, Strickland sat on his bed with Ryan and gave the boy turkey-calling lessons, which triggered a lot of smiles and laughs.

During the day, Strickland and Ryan, followed by cameras, tromped through the brush to places on the ranch where Hackley regularly spots turkeys.

After Saturday morning's hunt, Ryan returned to the lodge especially excited. "One more step! One more step!" he reported breathlessly. "Just one more step, and we'd have had him! We had the safety off the gun and everything."

"My goal on these hunts is to have fun," said Strickland, who has led other adventures with Catch-A-Dream recipients. "I don't want these children to think about anything other than turkey-hunting and eating too much. They get sick and tired of being sick and tired."

Besides making children happy, the program also serves as a ministry and an educational experience.



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Photo by Sheryl Smith-Rodgers

"It's for kids to experience the outdoors, see what God has put on earth for our benefit," said Covington, a county Extension agent in Port Gibson, Miss. "We also keep in touch with our kids before and after an adventure so they know there are people who are thinking and praying for them."

Memories of previous Catch-A-Dream recipients both uplift and sadden fellow board member Harry Dendy. One boy passed away shortly before his scheduled hunting trip. Another died two weeks after his fishing expedition. "His mother said he was absolutely thrilled to take the trip," recalled Dendy, director of public and legislative affairs for the Farm Credit Bank of Texas in Jackson, Miss. "They had some of his fishing pictures at the funeral."

The anticipation of his own Catch-A-Dream trip motivated Ryan to regain his strength. "He walked and rode his bike to prepare for this trip," said Roger Welch. "Catch-A-Dream is just unbelievable!" ■ SSR

*For more information or to make a donation, write to Catch-A-Dream, Box 9601, Mississippi State, MS 39762; phone Dr. Martin W. Brunson, (662) 325-3174; or visit [www.catchadream.org](http://www.catchadream.org).*