



## Chasing the Dream

Starkville-based Catch-a-Dream Foundation makes ailing hunter's hopes reality

Story by CASEY HILDER

**I**N HIS LAST DAYS, 66-YEAR-OLD BRUCE BRADY WISHED for a world where the terminally ill could experience the joy of one final hunt.

Brady, a resident of Brookhaven, Mississippi, and cancer victim, found solace in hunting and fishing during his last days in autumn of 1999. According to friends, it was the one thing that offered an escape from the ravages of cancer. "I became involved when our extension director at Mississippi State University was asked if extension could assist a gentleman who was then dying of cancer with an idea that he had," says Marty Brunson, CEO and founder of the Catch-a-Dream Foundation. "That gentleman was Mr. Brady."

Brady died in February of 2000, but his wish of a last hunt for those living with terminal illness would live on in Brunson's Catch-a-Dream Foundation, a nonprofit group with a headquarters that sits comfortably on a 43-acre patch of land seven miles southwest of Starkville, Mississippi. Brady passed away just two weeks after the initial planning sessions for the group. "Ironically, I never knew Bruce," Brunson says. "I had been in the same room with him plenty of times, but I never knew the man personally. But now, 15 years later, I feel like I know him pretty well." He had an idea, but not much else. At that time, Brunson was working as extension leader of wildlife and fisheries at Mississippi State. "The meeting

between us never took place," he says. "However, I did meet with his family with a goal of continuing to shape his idea to 'stand in the gap.'"

The "gap" Brunson refers to is the current policy of most charitable wish-granting organizations, which places a strict ban on firearms and hunting-related activities.

The group was formed in mid-2000 in conjunction with the Brady family, the MSU-Extension Service, the Mississippi Wildlife Federation and the Mississippi 4-H Clubs Foundation.



The program was run from the Mississippi State University campus from 2003 to 2012 before venturing out on its own. "We currently operate independently of the university by design, not by any negative issues," says Brunson.

The organization currently hosts an average of 40 children a year from 46 different states and Canada, though Brunson says some years can see as many as 60. "The number that we host often depends on the application rate," he says. "For example, we just hosted a black bear hunt in Wisconsin for a young man, as well as 13 whitetail deer hunts in Iowa coming up. We are, of course, entering the busy season for us."

Land for the hunts is offered up by charter organizations and outfitters, commercial folks who are in the business of providing these services for a fee. Because of its unpredictable nature, the Catch-a-Dream Foundation does not utilize private land.

Hunts have taken place as near as Vicksburg to as far off as the Canadian wilderness and nearly everywhere in between. Youths are treated to grand, once-in-a-lifetime hunts for game like elk, whitetail and more. "We have probably about 200-250 outfitters in our database," Brunson says. "Of course, we don't use all of those annually, but it's nice to have the backup."

The organization hosts several annual fundraising events, including the annual Catch-a-Dream Bass Classic every May, which is the second largest Mississippi-based charity fishing event behind the St. Jude Bass Classic.