

Empty Wheelchairs

By: Hilary Powell

When we were first invited by Perry Heleski to come to Muy Grande Ranch and write an article about a hunt they had planned for September 9-12th, I really wanted to say no. "We're too busy; I'm not good with meeting new people. I didn't have any details about the weekend and I HATE not knowing how to plan! I'm not a professional writer by ANY stretch of the imagination!" The list of excuses went on and on. Thankfully my husband ignored them all and said, "It will be good for us" so off we went.

As we drove up the drive that Friday evening toward the gorgeous lodge, it wasn't the breathtaking view of rolling, wooded hills and green pastures that most captured my attention. A single, solitary wheelchair sat empty by the curb, eerily presiding over the preparations for the hunt. This would be a recurring theme throughout the weekend.

We had been told that the hunt was set up through the Tony Semple Foundation for Hope. To some die-hard Detroit Lions fans that might mean something, but Kelly and I were clueless. It was explained later that this was an organization that set up outdoor adventures for children

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with life-threatening or life altering illnesses.

Since all of the hunters and guides had headed to their blinds, we decided to find out the whos and whats behind the hunt. Mike Ruhlig, one of the Foundation's

all wanted the chance to give back. They love working with the kids and their families. It takes a lot of planning and teamwork to put a hunt like this together, but they wouldn't miss it for the world. Oddly enough, the foundation's biggest hurdle in organizing something like this isn't the money or the time. It is finding candidates for the hunt. The dreams are there; the desire to grant the wishes is there; they need help letting people know it's all there.

While sitting at the lodge waiting for the hunters to return, the first call came over the radio "Big Buck Down!" and the excitement began. By the third call on Friday night that a buck was down, spirits were high and people couldn't stop smiling.

board members, was more than happy to answer all of our questions. Then he took us to meet Tony. Having never met a professional athlete, I wasn't sure what to expect. In fact, after realizing that Tony was an athlete, Kelly and I were skeptical about the true motivations behind the hunt. We were both thinking ego trip and publicity stunt. I have never been so happy to be proven wrong.

First impression of Tony is that he is a big guy. As you talk to him, you realize that his heart is even bigger! He is passionate about helping these kids and their families, and shows it in everything that he does. When asked why he does this, his answer is simple yet not easy: he has been so blessed by God in his life and he feels the calling to help others and give something back.

In fact, the general consensus of the Foundation board members, including the original founder Craig Mortz, seemed to be that they



Watching the triumphant hunters come back I by I with their trophies and wearing their custom fitted camo donated by sponsors,



I was struck again by the sight of the empty wheelchairs lining the driveway. For 1 brief, shining moment, these very special people got to be "just like everyone else". They got to enjoy the outdoors, take in the thrill of the chase, and the victory of the harvest. These are moments that will last for a lifetime.

Each hunter was able to harvest a great buck that weekend. As each exciting story was told, we realized the extent of planning that took. A special wagon was needed to get them to the blinds, along with modifications to get them into the blinds. For those who didn't have full mobility or use of their hands, there was a specially designed piece of electronic equipment called "The Liberator". When the buck was in range, it allowed the hunter to use something like a joystick to aim the rifle. When they were ready to take the shot, the guide would arm the rifle and the hunter would pull the trigger by pushing a button.

But this wasn't just about the hunt. It was an adventure that these kids couldn't get anywhere else. Perry and Paulette Heleski, also wanting to give back and help bring joy to others, were very gracious hosts going above and beyond to give the families an experience of a lifetime. Besides the great hunting, the kids got to fish, hang out at the bonfire, watch movies in the large in-home theater, go on a hayride that toured the entire facility, and be entertained by some great musicians that were brought in. During each of these experiences, the wheelchairs were

left behind and "eternal memories" were made. One young man spent most of his time searching for grasshoppers and enjoying the freedom of the wide open country



and fresh air - no wheelchair, just grass stains on his knees! And we can't forget that the wonderful meals prepared by Muy Grande's chef made sure that no one ever went hungry.

This experience really helped open my eyes to what we take for granted every day. All of the simple things that we do, seemingly without thought, take considerable planning for some. For example, when we plan a vacation, our first thoughts are about what we will get to do there or where we will eat. For one of the families at Muy Grande that weekend, their first thought when planning a trip is how close is the nearest hospital. They told of how hunting is what "keeps their son going". He had been in the hospital, in very serious condition, prior to the hunt, but knowing he had it planned is what helped "pull him through the tough times". He had gotten out less than a week before they arrived at the ranch.

Another family talked of the emotions of the weekend. "The looks on the kids' faces are indescribable. Just can't say how much this means. This is a dream come

true. What these people are doing for you is special. It's about more than money". Their son told them, "Dad, I've been smiling for 2 days!". "It does your soul good to be around people that are like this". (cont. on page 22)



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Not to be left out, the hunters themselves had a lot to say about the entire experience. “A good day in the woods”. “It was great to be in a Christian environment hanging with Christian buddies. The hunt was just a bonus!” A “ton of fun!”

We had started the weekend surrounded by strangers, but as I sat there watching all of the excitement, I started to realize exactly what I was blessed to be a part of. This was relationships and bonds being made and strengthened. I was humbled by these “Angels among us”. They are the great ones. These families, some by blood – some by choice, are the ones that struggle day and night to overcome. And for just a moment, I got a glimpse of Heaven’s Unity and felt God’s Peace as He smiled down at the innocence and joy of these kids. I am blessed to know them.

