Dream Day
Young cancer patients visit outdoors in annual event at Clinton fishing hole

By LAURIE SMITH ANDERSON
Advocate staff writer

CLINTON — Sixteen-year-old Danny Bozeman didn't know whether to register as a patient or a volunteer at Dream Day Foundation's fifth annual "Fishin' Galore" for young cancer patients.

When he was 10 years old, Bozeman, who was in chemotherapy for Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, asked a family friend, Clarence "Poonie" Fruge, to take him fishing. Fruge called his boss, John Engquest, who owns T-Bar-J Ranch in Clinton, and asked him if they could fish in one of his ponds.

"I remember it was cold and raining," Bozeman said. "I really didn't think we were going to catch anything. We went to a pond in the back and I caught an 8-pound bass, I was hooked. And that's how Dream Day got started."

The next year, Bozeman went back, accompanied by four or five other cancer patients who had heard about his trip. Dream Day Foundation was formed to organize the annual event and, each year, the "Fishin' Galore" got bigger and bigger.

This year, Bozeman said he split his time between work and play. "I went fishing, shot skeet, sang karaoke and checked out the girls, but also helped with registration and cooking."

"I beat him shooting skeet," bragged Jason Schwartz, a friend from Denham Springs who went through chemo at the same time.

"Yeah, but I beat him at archery," Bozeman shot back.

For more information about Dream Day, write: Dream Day Foundation, P.O. Box 52945, Baton Rouge, LA 70892, or call 261-1221, Ext. 402.

Brennan Bergeron, 5, of Youngsville, tries to get crickets out of his container while fishing at Dream Day Foundation's recent 'Fishin' Galore' at the T-Bar-J Ranch in Clinton. The foundation hosts the annual event as a fun day for cancer patients, like Brennan, and their families and a fund-raiser for St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

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Then they were off in an attempt to convince the tank operator into letting them drive the armored vehicle.

The May 1 event was a fun outing for patients of St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital, who tried their hands at fishing, horseback riding, hot air balloon rides and more. It was also a fund-raiser for the hospital in Memphis, Tenn. This year, a check for $100,000 was presented to a St. Jude representative.

About 70 cancer patients and more than 300 family members attended Dream Day, which was manned by more than 350 volunteers, according to board member Penny Fruge. “We call them (the patients) our ‘stars.’ Whatever they want on Dream Day, if we can do it for them, we will,” she said.

Most of the patients were from this area, however, several came down from St. Jude’s to attend as well. Some of the cancer patients were easy to pick out; they were in wheelchairs or wore masks or sported caps and hats over bald heads. Others, like Bozeman and Schwartz, long in remission, were indistinguishable from the rest of the crowd.

“I am from Venezuela,” said 8-year-old Gustavo Gutierrez. “Can I take this little ducky home with me?” The baby duck rested quietly on the boy’s lap as he sat in his wheelchair. “I’m going to call him Maxie but I don’t know if it’s a boy or a girl.”

“Absolutely not,” said Yajaira Gutierrez when she heard of her son’s request. “We cannot take the duck back to Memphis with us.”

The Gutierrez family came from Venezuela to Tennessee when Gustavo was diagnosed with leukemia. Three months later, their younger son, Gabriel, was diagnosed with a brain infection. He, too, is confined to a wheelchair.

“At first, I asked, ‘Why me?’ But the people at St. Jude’s were so wonderful. I have learned so much; I’ve been taking classes. I’m thinking that, when I return to my country, I will be able to help others who have problems like we’ve had.”

Ana Paula Jacob, 7, of Brazil, also came down from Memphis and was returning with a bag full of stuffed animals she had won playing games at Dream Day.

“Look at my earrings,” she said. “They’re made from my teeth.” Close examination revealed a tiny baby’s tooth hung suspended from each ear. Swaying in her wheelchair to the beat of a loud band, Ana laughed at her visitors’ surprise and clutched a toy dog close to her heart.

“This is a very special day — more so for us, the volunteers, than for the kids,” Engquest said. “I have to say that this is the most gratifying thing I’ve ever been involved in. Every year, since the first one, we’ve had great weather. We say that God won’t let it rain on Dream Day.”

Thirteen-year-old Cody Bordelon of New Roads still talks about the 7-pound bass he caught at Dream Day the year before last.

Thomas Henson, 12, has his 6-pound bass mounted and hung in his living room.

But the big ones weren’t biting much this year. Weighing in at just under 3 pounds, the bass caught by Ryan Waguespack, 17, was one of the bigger catches of the day.

Not that it mattered.

“We got here at 6:30 this morning and we won’t leave ‘til they kick us out,” said Thomas’ mother, Debbie Henson. “This is one morning Thomas doesn’t have any trouble getting out of bed early. We know a lot of families here. There are some new faces, but a lot of the same old ones too. That’s really gratifying.”

St. Jude’s has an active patient population of about 4,000 children with cancer and other catastrophic diseases; many are from Louisiana. Admission is based on physician referral. No family is ever asked to pay for treatment.