

Right on target

By *DUSTIN BLEIZEFFER*
Star-Tribune staff writer

HULETT -- Thirteen years old, and it hurts to walk. One of the major side-effects of battling leukemia with chemotherapy is deterioration of the joints, especially in the hips.

Another thing about the disease is that people won't leave you alone. Brad Clanton doesn't want attention because his illness makes him different. He wants people to be interested in him because he's Brad -- a regular 13-year-old. And also because he happens to be exceptionally good with a rifle.

On Monday, Clanton had placed a single, perfect shot into an 8-point whitetail buck deer at 228 yards. Then on Tuesday afternoon he popped a wild turkey on the move 164 yards away. That one really felt good. For the first time that day, Clanton broke a big, happy smile. Then he threw an arm around his hunting guide, Lloyd Jolley.

"Any other animals want to mess with me?" Clanton quipped, standing over the bird.

"How about prairie dogs? Do you want to shoot some prairie dogs?" asked his second hunting guide, Jim Neiman.

"Prairie dogs?" Clanton answered. "They're like these little chubby things. They're too cute."

The hunting trip near Hulett was a bit surreal for both Clanton and his whole family. For once, their lives weren't ruled by leukemia.

"This is five days without treatments, doctors and therapy," said Clanton's mother, Sherry Vidrine. "I don't think they realize what they've done for our whole family."

Clanton's family would have never made the weeklong hunting trip to northeast Wyoming without the help of the Mississippi Wildlife Federation's Catch A Dream program, along with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, the Wyoming Wool Growers Association, the Wyoming chapter of the Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife, and the state Legislature.

Proposed by those organizations, a bill was passed during the last legislative session that allows the Game and Fish Commission to grant up to five elk, 10 deer, 10 antelope and 10 wild turkey licenses a year for the exclusive distribution by nonprofit charitable organizations for use by people 18 years and younger with life-threatening illnesses.

Taking the whole family

Since he was diagnosed over a year ago, Clanton and his mother have spent more time in Memphis, Tenn., for chemotherapy and other treatments than at home in Albany, La. A friend at the hospital noticed the toll it was taking on the family and suggested the Catch A Dream program. After the arrangements were made, Clanton took advantage of the opportunity and informed everyone he was taking the whole family on a trip to Wyoming as a birthday gift to his mother.

"That's the way Brad is. He's very generous," Vidrine said.

Brad, brother Matt Clanton, 15, brother Theron Vidrine, 5, step-father John Vidrine and Brad's mother flew into Rapid City, S.D., on Saturday. By the time the family arrived at their guest home in Hulett there was a 4-inch-thick layer of something Brad and his brothers had never seen before.

Snow.

Of course, a snowball fight quickly ensued, and the family began to shed the worrisome load of doctors and chemotherapy they'd been carrying for so long.

Sherry Vidrine said while staying in Hulett, the family was treated to a kind of small-town generosity that made her feel as though they'd traveled back in time to the Old West. The splendor of large, blue skies, Devils Tower, snow-draped trees and teeming wildlife was like a dream.

"It's kind of surreal for me," she said.

Brad doesn't care much for doting attention, but it was difficult to avoid in this community of generous hosts. Often, he gave short answers and was visibly fatigued. When a group of hunters on the trail offered breakfast, Brad spoke up and said he was hungry.

In a hide-away cabin in the hills, Brad and his party were treated to thick sausage patties, bacon, biscuits, gravy and pancakes. And then the cooks made Brad fess up about the fluorescent pink cast on his right hand.

"I was punching my pillow and I hit the post on the bed," Brad explained.

After bagging the turkey, Brad and his entourage gathered at the Ponderosa Cafe in Hulett and told stories about the morning's hunt while Brad rested his head on the table.

"I think it's meant a lot to him, even though he doesn't express himself that much," John Vidrine said later while standing outside the taxidermist's shop. "He couldn't stop from laughing yesterday when he shot that deer. I don't know if he had the confidence that he was going to be able to do it, but he did it."

Star-Tribune reporter Dustin Bleizeffer can be reached at (307) 682-3388 or dzeffer@trib.com.