

WISHING WITH FISHING



BECKY MALKOVICH / THE SOUTHERN

Mitchell Balderas caught six catfish with the assistance of pro fisherman Jeff Dodd during a special fishing day sponsored by the United Special Sportsman Alliance at Rend Lake on Monday.

Event brings ill, special-needs children to the lake

BY BECKY MALKOVICH
THE SOUTHERN

Monday may have been Mitchell Balderas' first day on Rend Lake, but thanks to some sage advice from catfisherman Jeff Dodd, he already had the first rule of fishing down pat.

"Don't give up your honey hole," Dodd reminded the Sussex, Wis., boy before his interview with the media. "When they ask you where you caught the fish, tell them you caught it in the lip."

Balderas, 7, apparently took that advice to heart and despite repeated attempts to find out exactly where he caught the six catfish he brought back to shore, Balderas' lips were pretty much sealed.

"In the lake," he said, drawing a big thumbs-up from Dodd. "In the lake."

Balderas was one of 28 children

participating in the sixth annual United Special Sportsman Alliance fishing getaway at the Rend Lake Resort.

The event brings critically ill or special-needs children and their families to the resort for an expenses-paid, fun-filled, two-night getaway.

"I think children find their greatest peace in the great outdoors," USSA CEO and founder Brigid O'Donoghue said. "It helps replace the bad memories with good ones."

Each child, siblings included, is paired up with a pro catfish angler and taken out on a boat for a day on the water. Volunteer Shannon Flannery, 22, was a participant six years ago during her battle with leukemia. She said including siblings in the fun is important.

"I wasn't the only one fighting the cancer — it was a whole family effort and USSA

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INSIDE: Check out what Chad Morgenthaler has to teach this week with pro fishing tip. **Sports 1C**

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Twenty-eight children enjoyed a day on Rend Lake on Monday during the sixth annual United Special Sportsman Alliance fishing getaway.

FISHING: Event helps kids get out and fish

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includes the whole family, allowing everyone a getaway," she said. "It's really non-stop smiles the whole time you're here."

Dodd, on the pro staff of Bass Pro Shops, Daiichi Bleeding Bait Hooks and American ProCatters, knows all about those smiles — he's driven from Brazil, Tenn. five years in a row to see them.

"It's all about the kids and seeing the smiles on their faces. If you can't drive three hours for that, well, I guess there's just something wrong with you," he said.

"This puts things in perspective and makes you realize that a lot of what we think is important doesn't really amount to a hill of beans. These kids are amazing."

O'Donoghue started the non-profit alliance in 2000 to give free hunting, fishing, camping or canoeing trips to the children and their families and provide them with a respite from their troubles.

The all-volunteer staff, including the pro anglers, and donations help make events like the one at Rend Lake possible.

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