Ryan Neal dreamed of helping others experience the thrill of the hunt. One year later, his final wish was granted.

A Young Hunter's Legacy

They were cousins and best friends since childhood. The day before he died, Ryan Neal (left) revealed to cousin Jason Helldoerfer a wish to build accessible hunting opportunities for the disabled. One year later, friends and family gathered to dedicate Neal's dream.

Story and Photos
By Joe McFarland

Ryan Neal knew he was lucky. At an age when most young men assume they're entitled to everything the world has to offer, this 24-year-old outdoorsman from southwest Illinois was busy thinking about ways he could share one of his most treasured possessions: the ability to get outdoors and go hunting.

For Neal, the experience had no rival. Even after his best friend and hunting pal Jason Helldoerfer got luckier than Neal—bagging the monster 8-pointer they'd both been eyeing on opening day of firearm deer season in 2008—Neal celebrated afterward by encouraging his cousin to figure out a way to share this fantastic outdoor experience they both loved.

"We spent part of the day driving around town, showing off the deer," Helldoerfer explained of that shared triumph between friends. "And then we spent the rest of the day scouting around our woods, figuring out where we could put trails to make it accessible for disabled hunters."

It was an astonishing, seemingly out-of-the-blue idea from Neal. With no experience and no tangible notion of how to develop this idea of granting hunting opportunities to the disabled, Neal's selfless ambition might well have ended that day. What ended, instead, was Ryan Neal's life. Just two days after sharing with his cousin this dream of enabling the disabled, Neal was killed in a traffic accident.

For stunned family and friends, everything went dark on November 23, 2008. The grieving continues to this day. But Helldoerfer never forgot what he and his cousin had discussed during deer season. He told Neal's parents.

"That was Ryan," explained Mike Neal, father of the late hunter. "He was always thinking about others. Maybe that's why he had so many friends. It seemed like a million people came to the funeral—and half of them we'd never met before."

As winter passed into spring, the idea of creating hunting opportunities for disabled children and adults remained a distant, unfulfilled wish.

A chance conversation between "The Camouflage Chef" Lee Conway (left) and Mike Neal led to contacts that enabled the construction of the accessible hunting blind near Carlyle Lake. DNR Disabled Outdoor Opportunities Coordinator Jay Williams (right) takes a spin on the donated mine-belt pathway.

"We didn't know what to do or how to do it," Mike Neal admitted. But then a chance meeting sparked a new opportunity. One day Neal, a plumbing contractor, was doing some work near Belleville for "The Camouflage Chef" Lee Conway, an avid outdoorsman who knew somebody at the Department of Natural Resources. Conway had prepared wild game recipes for *Outdoor*-Illinois magazine in 2007, and kept in touch with the staff.

"Mike told me the tragic story about Ryan," Conway explained. "And I knew I had to do whatever I could to make this happen. It turned out, all I had to do was make a call to get things started, and from that point on, everybody else stepped up to the plate."

Quickly, one phone contact led to another. At Eldon Hazlet State Recreation Area at Carlyle Lake, site superintendent Gary Tatham knew of a 16-year-old Eagle Scout searching for a project to complete. DNR's Disabled Outdoor Opportunities Program Coordinator Jay Williams, himself a paraplegic, got involved and offered specifications and industry contacts for creating a permanent, accessible hunting blind.

It quickly became apparent that thousands of dollars would be needed to develop the structure. But momentum was building. The Ryan Neal Memorial Fund already had been established. Word spread. Everyone, including Conway, offered contributions. Ryan's pals on his former dart league held a fundraiser. Strangers came forward with gifts.

"This was all done by private individuals. All of the money was raised $5 and $10 at a time," Mike Neal recalled. Eventually, more than $4,000 was raised. In the spirit of the effort, Quad County Ready Mix not only donated the concrete for the spot where the blind would rest, they personally poured the slab and finished it for free. To make wheelchairs glide easily from the parking lot to the site, Gateway Mine at Coulterville donated a smooth, wide mine belt to lay across the ground.

For site superintendent Tatham, witnessing a community working together on a mission became the highlight of his 2009 summer as he directed his staff to create an opening near an agricultural field and lake.

Young archery hunter Colt Raterman of Aviston bagged a monster, 9-point, drop-tine whitetail from the Ryan Neal Memorial blind on Nov. 24, 2009.

"Our limited staff is stressed in so many ways," Tatham said. "But my guys really got into this project and nobody complained."

By November, less than a year after his death, Ryan Neal's final wish was granted. The new hunting blind with its strategically perfect line of sight near one of Eldon Hazlet's choice whitetail crossings was finally installed and opened to disabled hunters.

For Art Chaney of nearby Keyesport, being alive to experience the gift from the late hunter seemed nothing short of a miracle. Doctors in St. Louis warn him he might not live long enough to receive the heart transplant he desperately needs. Despite a bypass, a pacemaker, a defibrillator and a weak heart functioning at a fraction of normal capacity, Chaney carefully made his way out to Ryan Neal's dream on November 6 and took a seat in the autumn woods. One week later, as Neal's family and friends gathered to visit the legacy of a 24-year-old dreamer, Chaney passed around fresh venison sausage to the group, venison he bagged here one week earlier.

"Ryan had a big heart for the disabled," Mary Neal recalled of her son as she walked slowly along the path built in his honor. She maintains she never knew where he got the idea.

"But I wasn't surprised," she said quietly. "He said on his Facebook page that the person he most admired, the person he would most like to meet, was God."