



REFLECTIONS ON HIS
LIFE'S "SECOND
HALF" PURPOSE LED
STEVE NOOYEN TO
FOUND WHEELCHAIR
WHITETAILS.



**ALUMNUS STEVE
NOOYEN FOUND HIS
MIDLIFE MISSION:
OFFERING GUIDED
HUNTS WHERE THOSE
IN WHEELCHAIRS
EXPERIENCE THE
OUTDOORS AND
RENEW THEIR SPIRITS.**

BY PATRICK DURKIN

Steve Nooyen slipped through a tangle of balsam firs, stepped onto a two-track dirt road in northern Wisconsin, and hurried to the hunter waiting nearby in the darkness.

Lowering his headlamp's beam to avoid blinding him, Nooyen clapped a hand on Mike Barnes' shoulder and announced, "Congratulations! You got yourself a really nice deer."

Nooyen, Bus Ad '88, felt Barnes quiver and start sobbing. After harnessing his emotions, Barnes told Nooyen, "You have no idea what this means to me." Barnes, a health care engineer from North Carolina, felt moved by the forest, its autumn colors, his first success with a crossbow and the anticipation of fresh venison. He hadn't hunted in five years. In fact, he seldom hunted as an adult, even though he grew up hunting and fishing.

Like most U.S. hunters, Barnes finds hunting property increasingly rare as suburbs sprawl deeper into rural America and absentee landowners lease access rights to high bidders. But Barnes faces more formidable barriers too. He has used a wheelchair since a car crash at age 17 severed his spine in three places. He struggles crossing raised thresholds between rooms, let alone the bogs, creek bottoms and log-strewn hillsides of deer woods.

And make no mistake: Serious hunters like Barnes don't just switch "hobbies" if they suddenly can't hunt. Research in the 1970s by University of Wisconsin–Madison sociologists found that more than 60 percent of deer hunters would miss it as much or more than all other interests.

CALLED TO THE WILD



Kristi and Steve Nooyen have merged their love of the outdoors, their faith and their desire to serve others into a venture that brings outdoor adventures to people who can't otherwise access them.

Like other hunters, Tom Narmore came with a friend or family member, in his case, Daniel Kritz (standing).



facial hair when I started, and I had my first gray hairs when I finally got one," he relates. "Most people have no idea how hard it is to get a deer." Always athletic, Nooyen easily crossed terrain that tripped others. Later, about the time he shot his first deer, he learned some in wheelchairs envied his freedom to tackle such obstacles.

That lesson came from Don Hansen, who has relied on a wheelchair since age 8 because of spina bifida. Nooyen and Hansen met in 1998 through a volunteer group that took disabled people fishing. When they weren't volunteering or carrying out duties as organization board members, Nooyen and Hansen often hunted or fished together. Those outings taught Nooyen that good intentions alone don't ensure fun for hunters and anglers in wheelchairs.

"Crossing gravel parking lots and getting into boats can be challenging, even impossible," Nooyen says. "Each person has specific needs requiring plans and patient service from others."

These experiences stayed with Nooyen as he lived his life with Kristi and built a business. He opened Wisconsin's first Home Instead senior care franchise at age 30 and later added six more. Imbuing the operations with a sense of mission — even listing God as CEO on the company website — he kept alive a plan to run the company for 20 years, reassess life at 50 and step aside from day-to-day operations.

With these milestones approaching, Nooyen engaged with the Halftime Institute in 2015 to craft his life's "second-half" mission. Through prayer and reflection, he recognized faith as a driver in his life since his early days at Marquette, when he ran himself ragged struggling to keep up with his classes while working part-time jobs to cover tuition. Feeling adrift, a country boy in the city, he found sanctuary in the Masses held in the basement of the Church of the Gesu. Worshipping with people from different walks of life, including homeless people finding refuge from the winter cold, he reshaped his spirit by feeling their struggles. "I put all my attention toward the Lord and worship," he recalls.

Nooyen knows all about hunting's deep hold on people. He was anticipating moments like this when he created Wheelchair Whitetails, the program he operates with his wife, Kristi. Each weekend from September through November, the couple welcomes two or three hunters in wheelchairs to their 519 acres just south of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Their guests use crossbows to hunt white-tailed deer from one of 15 blinds overlooking forest trails or openings. By season's end, the Nooyens feed, house and guide up to 30 hunters, each accompanied by a friend or family member, all for free. Nooyen considers it a ministry — an opportunity for hunters like Barnes to experience something transcendent in the woods and come together with others in prayer before or afterward, if they're so moved.

Nooyen grew up hunting and fishing around New Franken, east of Green Bay. He'd been hunting for 13 years when he first tasted success at 26. "I didn't have

Decades later, not surprisingly, faith would be front and center — along with enjoyment of Wisconsin's wilds and a calling to serve others — in the mission he crafted for life after 50: "To bring smiles, laughter and Christ through my words and actions in outdoor adventures to the elderly, young, and disabled ... one person at a time." Soon afterward, Nooyen created Wheelchair Whitetails. He now works 40 weeks per year tending food plots, maintaining a

6-mile trail network and handling other projects. He drives hunters and companions to their blinds in an all-terrain vehicle and customized trailer for the hunters' wheelchairs.

The Nooyens' unfenced property is bordered east, south and west by public forests, which keeps deer wild and wary. With about half of the guests arrowing a deer each weekend, Nooyen focuses more on making memories. Guests see plenty of birds and other wildlife, and enjoy good food, engaging conversation and wheelchair-friendly accommodations.

Nooyen sees everything from his guests' perspective, says Barnes — table heights, restroom and blind designs, yardage markers for shooting and the companionship of their hunting partners.

Nooyen trusts God to choose which hunters become his guests. And after they arrive, he subtly takes their "spiritual temperature," offers a prayer before each meal, and strives to serve them as Jesus would with humility, patience and kindness.

"Sometimes our meal prayer leads to conversations where we explore God and the Scriptures more deeply," Nooyen says. "I try to follow the Scriptures' verse to work diligently with all my heart as unto the Lord. There's ministry in everything. That's why I focus on quality experiences, not numbers."

The other guests in camp that October weekend with Mike and Jackie Barnes were Joshua Myers, an



John Martinson overcame barriers to experience a cherished pastime.

Below, Mike Barnes and Josh Myers (seated, from left) had strongly emotional experiences in the woods.

insurance associate from Wrightstown, Wisconsin, and his lifelong friend Dan Liska.

Myers was born with cerebral palsy and has spent his life in wheelchairs. He saw few deer during his hunts and never got a shot. As Myers and Liska prepared to head home empty-handed, Nooyen shared a note from another Myers friend, Brian Walder, who helped arrange the hunt. After reading the note, Myers sobbed and — like Barnes the night before — said, "Steve, you have no idea what this means to me." His three days at Wheelchair Whitetails were the longest time he'd ever spent in nature and its enriching silence.

"This trip had nothing to do with me learning how to hunt," Myers told Nooyen afterward. "Some time ago I lost my way with the Lord. ... In my heart, the Lord was speaking to me and letting me know He is still there, even though I had strayed (again). ... Your ministry is working, even if others don't express it this way, and I am forever grateful." Nooyen, meanwhile, says Barnes and Myers have no idea how much he appreciates them. "In that 18-hour span, two guys with totally different hunts had the same reaction," he says. "When they drove away, I sat on the cabin's steps and sobbed too. It felt like God was speaking, assuring me I was a good, faithful servant." ☺

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