

A ministry for wheelchair users

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GREEN BAY — A few years ago, Steve Nooyen, owner of Home Instead Senior Care, transitioned from the day-to-day operations of the business. His new role includes finding ways to steward the profits the company provides. Nooyen turns to Scripture as his guide.

“I get my lead from Ephesians 2:10, which describes that we are God’s workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works for that which God prearranged us to do,” he said. “I believe that God, over my 50-some years of life, had already predetermined the work that he wanted me to do and has given me skills and experiences along the way and resources, and says, ‘OK, I want you to further my kingdom by doing this.’”



Steve Nooyen, top right, is joined by hunters and their companions at the Wheelchair Whitetails camp in Florence County. Nooyen and his wife, Kristi, owners of Wheelchair Whitetails, offer guided crossbow deer hunts to wheelchair users with disabilities from late September through November. (Submitted photo | For The Compass)

Fueled by his 20 years of work with several organizations to provide outdoor experiences to the elderly and disabled, Nooyen and his wife, Kristi, started Wheelchair Whitetails in 2016 to provide guided deer hunts for wheelchair users. They purchased property in Florence County and spent the first year preparing the camp.

“We’ve got 500 acres, six miles of trail system and 15 wheelchair accessible blinds,” explained Nooyen. “We modified the cabins. We provide lodging, the hunting experience, the meals, and our guests don’t pay for anything.”

Hunts are conducted with crossbows and all equipment is provided. Each hunter must have a companion. Wheelchair Whitetails usually has three hunters in each session. Hunters and companions arrive on Thursday and depart on Saturday. The season runs from September through November. Season Three recently ended.

“These people for the most part have never met before,” said Nooyen. “Last week, we had two hunters from Canada — a guy from Vancouver Island, British Columbia, and another guy from Thunder Bay, Ontario, and two guys from Wisconsin, so we had four in this group. I don’t know these guys, but when you spend that much time together in an outdoor experience, you generally end up leaving like you’ve known someone your entire life. It’s hard to duplicate that.”

When the opportunity presents itself, Nooyen shares his faith with his guests.

“Over the course of the three-day hunt, these perfect strangers end up being friends,” he said. “During that time, I get a chance to test their spiritual temperature and find out what their relationship is with Jesus Christ. If it seems like it is appropriate, we are there for hunting, but if it’s appropriate, I share the Gospel with them.”

Most of the hunters share their stories. For example, two Wheelchair Whitetails hunters suffered spinal cord injuries in an automobile accident because they swerved to avoid hitting a deer. Another fell off scaffolding while working in his barn, and one young man was injured when he fell when sliding down a banister in high school.

“Most of the stories are extremely sad,” said Nooyen. “Several of the guys who were married at the time (of their injuries) lost their marriages.”

Nooyen also points to his longtime friendship with Don Hansen as a motivating force behind Wheelchair Whitetails. Hansen was born with spina bifida and began using a wheelchair when he was 8.

“I came into this world with working hands and working legs,” said Nooyen. “Somewhere, in that experience of growing up, I recognized the difference between me and him and others like him. I am thankful for that. I know how rewarding outdoor experiences are to me. Don

finds great satisfaction in the outdoors. To be able to provide some close experience is what I had in mind for Wheelchair Whitetails.”

The hunts are fair chase, so there are no fences on the property. Approximately 50 percent of the hunters harvest a deer, said Nooyen. They can keep the deer, which is field dressed, or have it donated to Wisconsin’s Hunt for the Hungry.

“The hunters are brought to the blinds in a specially designed trailer that I made,” said Nooyen. “It’s a real hunting experience. It’s really difficult. It’s much easier with a rifle at 150 yards than with a crossbow at 50 yards when trying to position a wheelchair to take a shot.”

The hunters are predominately men, but they have had some women, said Nooyen. Kristi doesn’t hunt, but enjoys the camp, he added.

“She prefers golfing,” he said. “She is awesome with the guests and making the meals.”

Nooyen, who formerly lived in De Pere where he served as a trustee and a member of the finance council at Our Lady of Lourdes Parish, now resides in the Sturgeon Bay area when not at the Wheelchair Whitetails camp. He helps lead a men’s group for a Bible study series through a church in Michigan. His life is all about ministry at this stage, he said, but that was also the case when he was running the business.

When building Home Instead Senior Care, which has more than 800 employees and offices around the state, Nooyen listed God as CEO on the business organizational chart.

“Our entire purpose for the company is to teach others about ‘love,’ the verb, which comes from (1) Corinthians Chapter 13,” he said. “(It) describes love in the active sense that we are called to love.

“I call what we do at Home Instead a ministry disguised as a for-profit company,” he added. “We happen to be in the senior care industry, but our primary purpose is to lead others to a conversation about our CEO, God.”

In turn, Nooyen describes Wheelchair Whitetails as a ministry disguised as a nonprofit. He will begin taking applications for the 2020 season in March. There was a waiting list this year.

“Guys ask to pay us something,” said Nooyen. “Absolutely not. Trevor, the young man who fell off the banister, lives at home. He requires a lot of assistance. His dad has to help feed him. He’s always looking for things to do with his son. Trevor is in his mid 20s. He absolutely loved it. I think he will be back. That’s my reward.”

For more information about Wheelchair Whitetails visit wheelchairwhitetails.org.

Seeking ‘Faith That Works’ nominees

Steve Nooyen was a 2015 Faith That Works award recipient. The Compass annually recognizes those who integrate their Catholic faith in their workplaces, parishes and communities. Nominees are required to be currently employed in the 16-county area of the Diocese of Green Bay, an active parish member and involved in parish or spiritually-based community programs or organizations.

Nominations will be accepted through Dec. 31. Award recipients are featured in a special section in The Compass and honored at a spring Mass and luncheon with Bishop David Ricken.

For a nomination form, visit thecompassnews.org. For more information, call (920) 272-8212 or email [\[email protected\]](#).