**The Joy of Fishing for All**

For many South Carolinians, fishing is a relaxing pastime that tantalizes the eyes, ears and nose. From the gentle glide of a boat skimming across the water to the flick of a baited line under the water’s surface, the sights of fishing are often quietly spectacular.

Fishing is a particularly joyful experience for Dorothy Barksdale, too. But this 62-year-old Laurens native isn’t your everyday sportsman. Barksdale has been legally blind since her mid-20s. That she can enjoy the simple pleasure of an afternoon of fishing is a gift is made possible by a joint effort between regional Lions Clubs in Columbia, Greenwood, Easley, Clemson and Santee, and the local chapters of the Federation Center of the Blind, an affiliate of the National Federation of the Blind of South Carolina.

Together, the groups plan, organize and execute annual spring fishing outings for blind adults age 18 and older, some of whom live with other handicapping conditions in addition to visual impairment. This year, fishing trips were planned in Pickens County and Greenwood, and included blind individuals from the Columbia, Anderson, Greenville, Spartanburg, Charleston, Summerville, Upper Dorchester and North Augusta areas.

The Federation Center of the Blind’s Executive Director, David Houck shared the long history behind the beloved program, which has helped hundreds of legally blind South Carolinians experience the joy of fishing on the water in a safe and comfortable way. In 2014, the groups whisked 43 fishermen and fisherwomen off for two-day weekends of fishing, along with a pack of local Lions Club volunteers who assisted with companionship, meal preparation, baiting hooks, moral support, and much more.

“This program began about 20 years ago with the aim to provide recreational opportunities for the blind,” said Houck. “Since then it’s grown from the Midlands, into the Lowcountry and the Upstate, and beyond.” Participants for each trip, who are chosen through an application process, have several fishing holes from which to choose. “The Santee Lions Club trip is an overnight trip to Lake Marion with dinner and entertainment the night before the fishing begins. Then, the next day, the participants and Lions members all enjoy a day of fishing on Lake Marion together complete with a lunch which is boated out to everyone,” he said. Each participant who fishes is paired with one or more helpers and can choose where he or she would most enjoy fishing: from the pier or out on the lake in a pontoon boat.

Other trip participants venture north and head upstate from Columbia to the mountainous Rocky Bottom Retreat and Conference Center, a unique camp that’s operated by blind individuals for blind individuals. Open year round for the blind and their immediate family members, the Pickens County camp offers special programming including fishing as well as full week and weekend mountain vacation getaways. Each year the Rocky Bottom Retreat and Conference Center serves more than 1,000 individuals.

No matter where they take place, the group’s fishing experiences are rounded out with plenty of joyful, warm memories. From campfire cookouts to raucous rounds of bingo to sizzling pancake breakfasts, everyone knows they’re in for quite a good time. In fact, the fishing experiences have become so popular, according to Houck that an application process is now in place to select recipients with first priority going to those who have never been on one of the group’s fishing trips. The May fishing trip to Lake Marion included 28 participants and, two weeks later, a second trip to Rocky Bottom Retreat hosted fifteen blind individuals.

Like any fishing weekend, these trips aren’t solely about fun and fellowship; these jaunts are bona fide, blind-only competitive fishing tournaments with a few lucky participants earning local fishing glory. Each expedition names official winners for catching the largest fish and the most fish (plus an off-the-record honor for reeling in the tiniest catch). The two first-place tournament winners at each local tournament go on to participate in another larger all-blind fishing tournament held this October in Outer Banks, North Carolina.

The longstanding partnership, which spans about 15-20 years in South Carolina, is made possible each year thanks to wide support among regional Lions Club chapters. The Lions, one of the nation’s largest service club organizations, have a long history of helping the visually impaired. In 1925, Helen Keller charged the group to become “knights of the blind in the crusade against darkness.” It was a challenge they readily accepted and remains core to their mission of service today.

“We are so appreciative of the work of the Lions Clubs and have been for a number of years,” shared Houck. “Their support makes this important experience possible. Our participants truly enjoy fishing and many want to sign up year after year. Unfortunately, we always seem to have more applicants than we can serve in any given year.”

One of those happy fisherwomen is Barksdale, who has been on five fishing trips in South Carolina. Barksdale, who was born with cataracts and glaucoma, experienced worsening sight throughout her youth and eventually completely lost her ability to see by the age of 22. It was a total darkness, she said, that made her especially fearful of being on or around water throughout her life.

“The first time I went fishing I was so nervous about being on the water,” she said. “I feared even the thought of being on a boat. When I was selected for a trip, I was scared. But I went anyway and I had a ball.” On that trip Barksdale landed her first — and last — fish, so far. “On that first trip I caught a fish and it was so exciting,” she said. “But the last four times I’ve gone, *nothing*! Those fish just come along and eat my worm, but I still have so much fun.”

Barksdale is living proof that the simple act of going fishing can have lifelong downstream effects for blind individuals. “It’s an unbelievable experience that many people with blindness would otherwise never have,” said Barksdale. “Most individuals who are blind end up fearing water and never experience the feeling of being in a boat on the water. With the support of the Lions and an experience like this, they have a way to safely cope with those fears and hopefully even overcome them.”

Barksdale laughed when recalling her first trip to Lake Marion about five years ago. “I was so nervous and then when I got down to the dock where the boat was, I had to step way down to get into the boat,” she recalled. “I couldn’t get myself down to the boat! It took two men helping me, one on either side, and finally I had to just sit down on the dock and slide in. With their help, I did it. I finally got myself into that boat.”

She credits the five fishing experiences she’s had in helping her curb her longtime fear of being on the water in a way that’s opened up her life to new opportunities. “My family had always wanted to go on a cruise together but I was just too nervous about it,” she said. “Once I got around the water on Lake Marion and got used to it, I was finally ready to go on a cruise. In fact, I actually wanted to.”

A few years after she’d mustered the courage for her inaugural ocean-going voyage, her plans were sidelined by a startling change of health. She learned she had breast cancer in 2012 and had to seek a grueling series of treatments. “Once I was far enough along in my treatment and felt I was going to be okay, I had one question for the doctor, ‘Can I still go on that cruise?’” she said.

Just a few months later, in January 2013, Barksdale got the all clear and her sea-faring wish finally came true as she boarded a cruise ship for a five-day island jaunt. “By the time the cruise was over,” she laughed, “I did not even want to get off the ship! I just loved it.”

It’s stories like Barksdale’s and many others that keep this vital recreational opportunity on the event calendar each year, said Houck. Participants are already lining up for the opportunity to enjoy a day of fishing with the Lions again in 2015.

Among those who can already hear the hum of the boat engine and zip of the casting fishing line is Dorothy Barksdale. Her burning hope? Maybe 2015 will finally be the year she’s been waiting for — the year she finally catches The Big One. If not, she’ll happily settle for a little one, too. In her eyes, a fish is still a fish.

And she’d sure like to catch another one — soon.

*To learn more about the Lions-National Federation of the Blind of South Carolina fishing trips and other life enrichment opportunities for blind individuals and their families, visit http://www.nfbsc.net.*