

*"He wanted to go so bad. Even when he couldn't walk, he'd figure out a way to go."*

Tony Christnovich, describing his late father's passion for hunting

# Organization creating hunters for a lifetime

**F**ranklin — Helen Christnovich isn't the only first-time turkey hunter this spring, but she might be the only one who is 86 years old.

"Just because I'm old doesn't mean I can't do things other people do," she told me when I visited her recently at her Franklin home.

Christnovich is no stranger to hunting. She talked about how, many years ago when she lived up north in Florence County, she would shoot grouse — she called them partridge — and deer to feed her young children.

"There I was without water, without electricity and two babies," she recalled. "If I wanted water I'd take gallon jugs and go to the spring."

Times were hard, but Christnovich and her son, Tony, of Eau Claire, both spoke fondly of life in the north woods.

"It was living off the land," Helen said. "It was good."

Helen's husband, Jack, was an avid hunter, and Helen often accompanied him on his hunts before he died in 1999.

"Seven years ago, I went turkey hunting with my husband," she said. "But I didn't hunt. I sat in the blind with him and I was his go-for."

Tony is a retired high school teacher and former defensive coordinator for the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse football team. He talked about how his father loved to hunt, even after an industrial accident left him unable to walk.

"You'd see the smile on his face when hunting season came," Tony said. "His whole psyche would get a new spark of life. He wanted to go so bad. Even when he couldn't walk, he'd figure out a way to go."

Tony used to lift his dad into a wheelbarrow and wheel him to his boat so they could duck hunt together.

"It was so important for my

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Bob RIEPENHOFF

father to continue hunting recreationally," Tony said. "It kept him active. I'm sure it kept him living longer."

Memories of his father may have been what prompted Tony, along with three other La Crosse area sportsmen, to start a non-profit organization called the North American Squirrel Association two years ago.

"Our mission is to provide outdoor recreation opportunities for physically challenged and elderly people," he explained.

Despite the name — which was chosen, Tony said, because most landowners will let people squirrel hunt on their property — the group has taken more than 150 disabled and elderly people fishing on the group's 24-foot pontoon boat, plus another 50 participants on "buddy" hunting trips for deer, turkeys, ducks, pheasants and squirrels.

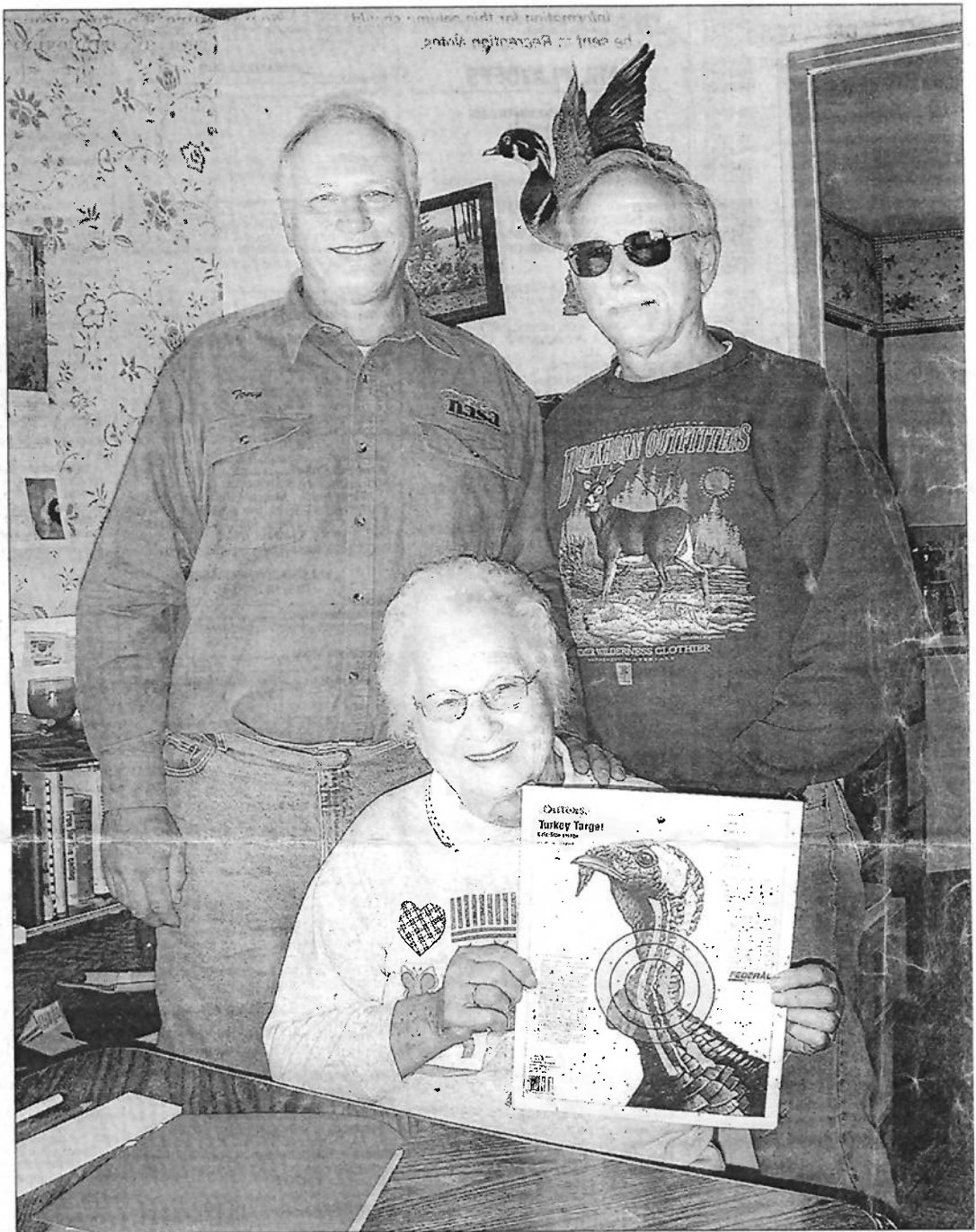
The group is planning a special deer hunt for disabled hunters Oct 1 to 9.

"Any disabled person that wants to hunt, all they have to do is contact us at (608) 781-3636," Tony said, or check the group's Web site — [www.na-sasquirrel.org](http://www.na-sasquirrel.org) — for hunting and fishing openings.

Helen's turkey hunt came about after Tony was contacted by a representative from the Wheelin' Sportsmen Club, an outreach program of the National Wild Turkey Federation.

"They wanted names of disabled women who would be interested in going on a turkey hunt," Tony said.

Tony didn't have to think



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**Helen Christnovich**, with her sons Tony (left) and George, participated in a turkey hunt earlier this month.

long before deciding that his mom, who has trouble getting around because of a bad leg, would be a perfect candidate for the hunt, which was held at the Valley Rod & Gun Club in Waukesha County earlier this month.

Helen and four other hunters attended a special safety meeting at the club prior to the hunt.

"There's so much to turkey hunting," she said. "You've got to watch so the turkey is not in line with other turkeys. You've got to make sure you see a beard (a clump of course

feathers that protrudes from a male turkey's chest). You have to be real still."

Helen bought a camouflage cap and face mask and borrowed a jacket from her grandson. And she sited-in her shotgun.

When the big morning arrived, she got into a blind with her mentor and turkey caller, Greg Lafratta, of Waukesha. She saw several turkeys and got a shot at a nice tom.

Unfortunately, she said: "I missed him. He ran off."

But Helen had fun, both sharing stories and hunting

with the other participants.

"It's something everyone should try," she said.

In fact, Helen is considering another turkey hunt.

"My boys, Tony and George, want me to go hunting with them up near La Crosse this fall," she said. "I'm thinking about it."

Maybe then her luck will change.

"Next time, I think I'll know what to do," she said.

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