



**Introducing 2022's Last Recipient: Veteran #31:
Jacob Spangenberg, Army National Guard
of Neenah, Wisconsin**

Putting This Veteran Back on The Road and Securing His Supportive Brotherhood

Family and brotherhood have always been important to Master Sergeant Jacob Spangenberg. He grew up with seven siblings, under a strict and modest roof filled with love, faith and support. Jake's family moved several times around Wisconsin, and again right before Jake entered Fox Valley Lutheran High School, making it tougher to fit in. He was your typical teen— into sports and antics; and as he grew older, he enjoyed the responsibility of helping his younger siblings. Realizing he wanted to support others professionally, and without family funds for a college education, Jake enlisted in the Army National Guard as a junior in high school for the tuition support the military would provide. He attended boot camp the summer before his senior year, graduated in 1998, then joined Headquarters Company, 2-127th Infantry Battalion as a Truck Driver.

Jake immediately settled into the cohesiveness of his Army family: he loved the tight bond and camaraderie, as well as the chance to be a part of something bigger. As is the nature of the Guard, he led a “normal” life and patiently waited for his one drill weekend a month or the call to deploy. He married young and divorced in less than a year. He filled his weekdays with school, worked several typical college jobs, played ball and hung with friends. In 2003, while loading equipment on a weekend drill, Jake experienced immediate pain in his lower back. He was a young, invincible guy; so he rested his back awhile, went on with his life and just dealt with aches and pains that wouldn't go away. He wouldn't learn until 14 years later when he suddenly couldn't walk and required emergency surgery, that he had then herniated two lower discs that impacted his sciatic nerve.

Jake wanted more out of life. After getting an associates degree and finding it hard to land the job he wanted, he pursued a bachelor's degree in Human Services to help others navigate the hardships of life and avoid some of the personal turmoil he was all too familiar with. Jake also aspired to higher ranks and a career within the Army National Guard. With a reorganization and limited options in his current position, after seven years he transferred out of his Unit in pursuit of advancement. He reclassified as a Paralegal and was promoted to Sergeant; and shortly after his training ended, he received orders to deploy to Iraq. While he enjoyed his new opportunities as a Paralegal, leaving his Unit was a decision he learned to regret for the rest of his life; and it created a void in his heart that would take 15 years to fill again.

In 2005, after training for almost 3 months in Mississippi, Jake landed in Camp Navistar, Kuwait, on Iraq's southern border where he'd live for the next 12 months. Although most soldiers have multiple roles during deployments, Jake had two very different responsibilities to balance. Half of his time was spent at Camp Navistar's Headquarters as Battalion Paralegal where he worked to assist its soldiers with legal needs, such as wills and power of attorney, as well as process paperwork for Article 15 nonjudicial needs and court martials. The second half was spent providing convoy security: randomly filling staff needs, in foreign trucks and dangerous routes, and with people who didn't know or trust him as a HQ guy. He lost connections and friends from his prior Unit; and when he learned of their efforts and injuries, he struggled with the guilt of not being with them. The void hit him hard emotionally; and, compounded by the dangers inherent in convoy work, a nasty mix of guilt, isolation and fear began to settle in Jake's mind. Unable to talk about it or show it, he masked his struggles and tamped it all down to do the work at hand. And that back

injury from long ago...the one he then thought little of, began to painfully flare now. The long hours and repeated jarring in trucks that took him over the rough terrain quickly worsened his back and sciatic pain. He pushed through each assignment doing his best to help those who depended on him, and he counted down the days until he was home.

After almost a year and a half away, Jake wanted only to get back to his new wife, return to school and move forward with his life plans. He didn't mention his struggles or pain, he didn't ask for help and he made excuses for the demons that affected him. He became a self-described "mess" after deployment. Having solely focused on military life and job performance while away, his return to civilian life felt overwhelming with different demands, pace and pressures that combined with the conflicting emotions he faced. Jake knew enough about himself, and his education thus far, to know he needed to find a release. Having always wanted to ride, he took a motorcycle class and quickly learned riding was, in fact, his thing. This 6'2" man bought a Sportster 883 to learn on and rode as much as he could. The immediate sense of calm and focus riding provided was life-changing for him; and with every mile he felt his burdens lift and his perspective refocus.

Jake continued with the Army National Guard, transferred around to a few more units and rose in rank, just as he wanted, but never seemed to regain the camaraderie he initially found. Although he was thrilled to welcome his only son, his life grew harder emotionally and financially. Another divorce, a bad home investment, bills and school loans piled up and the combination left him in debt that he is still working out of today. In a failed attempt to save his home, he sold his bike in 2010; and that loss hurt him more than any of the others. His back and leg pain slowed him down some, but without options he simply dealt with it. He's worked hard to move forward; and while he had his own significant struggles, Jake thrived in his efforts to care for others during theirs. He finally graduated with his degree in Human Services and has been working as a Substance Use Disorder Counselor for the past 14 years.

Along the way he met his current wife, Nicole. After she crushed him in bowling and darts, Jake still mustered the courage to ask for another date... and they've now been married four years and happily share custody of his son, Jaden. In 2017, after 20 years in, the Master Sergeant finally retired from the Army National Guard as the State Chief Paralegal. It wasn't until he retired that he finally connected with the VA for health care and had the back surgery he emergently required for his injury 14 years prior. He currently keeps his physical pain at a "tolerable" level and stays active, often paying for it later. But having lived nine years without a bike left him struggling more than he imagined; and in 2019, Jake took out a loan for a 19 year old Electra Glide, all that he could afford, to improve his own mental health. It's a loan he's still paying on today and, at the time, was one of his best investments in himself.

Jake's had a few rougher years since and is grateful he's had his bike to sort through the additional chaos in his mind and heart. In 2020, his youngest sibling Matthew, an Army National Guard Veteran who'd joined in the footsteps of his big brother and endured two rough combat deployments, took his life in suicide. Shocked and devastated, Jake rode for release and he connected with Veterans groups and friends for support, specifically one from deployment to Iraq, Nate. Nate talked him through the rough year sorting through questions, grief and healing; and when his best friend suddenly died in 2021 from a heart attack, Jake's life again turned upside down from lost brotherhood. As before, his bike moved him through pain; and this time, it lead him to the Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association (CVMA) in the Fox Valley area. He immediately bonded with a group that welcomed, understood and supported him, and his wife; and it gave him a feeling of camaraderie he'd not had since leaving his first Unit. Jake and Nicole spent 2021 riding together, building new friendships, and moving through their personal life challenges. Looking to enhance his involvement, Jake took on the role of Chapter Chaplain and began planning a benefit motorcycle ride, in his brother's memory, to raise awareness on Veteran suicide.

In the fall of 2021, his 21 year old bike started having transmission problems. Believing he could affordably fix the situation himself, Jake tried, then tried some more; and by the following summer the old transmission was smoking and required replacement. As the couple was saving for their first home, were still backed up in bills and on a very tight budget, they had no room for expensive repairs let alone a replacement bike. So this summer, on his "Ride for The 22" that he organized to prevent Veteran suicide...Jake drove in a car. And, to get to his beloved CVMA National meeting in Kentucky...he drove in a car then borrowed a friend's bike for their group rides. And in one more hopeful, but failed attempt to ride recently...he ended up towing his bike home. Believing his riding days were over again, he has grown more despondent this year... because not only did his loss of a bike affect his ability to ride and support his mental health, it affects his ability to stay within his new-found CVMA brotherhood.

Every 65 minutes a Veteran takes his or her life in suicide. That's 22 Veteran lives a day, and that is a horrific number that deserves our attention. Counselors like Jake, groups like CVMA, and resources like the VA, work to reduce struggles with mental health and offer support, but suicide's devastating impact leaves far more pain in its wake for family and friends. It is our mission to offer an alternative therapy to help heal our injured, struggling Veterans; and in our unique work, we look to help individuals either find that healing path, or stay on it, with a motorcycle as the tool to do so. Hogs for Heroes believes that supporting this man's ongoing healing would best be addressed by keeping him riding on the path he's forged. Unique to this bike, it's coming from the charitable hearts of the Tavern League of Wisconsin whose members across the state have personally shared and held fundraising events for us to collectively raise enough to sponsor a Harley. This will be the second bike they've paid for in two years! And since they hit their goal in late spring, we decided to let one more Veteran than originally planned sit on their generously donated funds, making Jake our ninth and final recipient of 2022, and our 31st in a little over six years of gifting Harleys.

Although we've traveled in some of the same circles, we'd never met; but Jake knew exactly who we were as we approached him. Our news of his selection brought him to tears and, unbeknownst to us, landed on the emotional second year anniversary of his brother's suicide. Hard as it was, we took tremendous comfort in knowing our gift would enhance and support a deserving life, and go miles, literally, in preventing the loss of others. We shared stories and laughed through the night as we learned more about Jake, his service and his family. When asked about his dream bike, without hesitation he replied "Road King"; so we sent him home with an assignment: find the one you want.

After hours and miles of searching the state's dealerships, Jake found "the one" the very next day at House of Harley in Milwaukee. It was a 2019 Road King in a "stand out" color he wanted, with throaty after-market pipes and only 2,400 miles on her. We encouraged Jake to look at a brand new Road King...but happy to have found a bike that met his needs and thankful for the chance to leave a few thousand dollars in the tank for the next Veteran, he respectfully declined. This was our first time buying a bike from House of Harley, and their attentive, generous support did not disappoint. They will be bringing that bike up to Jake's neighborhood to share in the gifting celebration with us.

Join our **31st Presentation of Keys Sunday, August 28, 2022 at 11:00 am!** We'll be hanging at **Willie Beamon's Bar and Grill in Neenah, WI**, a Tavern League Member, rain or shine, from 10:00 am to 1:00 pm for the chance to meet you and share our mission. And get this...**they will be donating 10% of all sales from 10 am to 1 pm to Hogs For Heroes** as the Tavern League works toward another Harley gifting in 2023! Cruise over for our last celebration of the year and eat, drink and hang with friends as we honor the respect and gratitude we have for all Veterans by welcoming this particular one back to The Road.