

## Introducing #34 Corporal Paul Kruse, Army Veteran of Green Bay, Wisconsin

Our gift changes more than just the Veteran's life: it also affects the lives of their spouses and family, and it enhances marriages and relationships. For the first time, we share a wife's perspective on need with you.

### *A Wife's Nomination Letter:*

*"Paul has had a love and passion for motorcycles for much longer than I have known him. Seeing the joy that riding sparks in him is one of the commonalities that brought us together. Paul owned a Harley when we met but, sadly, sold "his love" in 2016 to help finance our wedding, house and family essentials. Every time we almost have enough money saved for a "new to us" bike, some financial burden comes up—whether it was our kitchen flooding while we were away, or replacing our failing roof, or unexpectedly needing a bigger family vehicle after taking guardianship of our newborn niece—and we have to use our savings.*

*When Paul is able to go riding, it is the happiest and most relaxed I ever see him. Over the recent years Paul's physical pain has gotten much worse from his time in the military. I can tell that all of his anxieties, fears and (most of his) pain disappear when he gets to ride. His concerns melt away as he leans into the curves and his whole body relaxes as he enjoys the ride. Our current projected timeline of getting a bike for ourselves is about 16 years from now, when our youngest kiddos are likely to move out on their own. Paul is such a blessing to our family. He is our rock; he is always there to help us through our problems and worries despite carrying so many of his own. Paul is always willing to help others fix their bikes when he has the time while asking little in return just to be close to his passion. The simple act of working on motorcycles brings a calm to him where even playing with his children leaves a tension and pain in his body.*

*Our current situation has not been financially stable and is about to get more tight as Paul's VA disability status increased from 40% to 90% last year. This means he will be leaving his current job to alleviate a great deal of mental and physical strain on his body; and our family of six will be on a fixed income while we figure out our next moves. To see Paul ride again would mean the world to him and his family. I know he misses the camaraderie he had riding with friends and the peace when riding alone. As much as fixing bikes helps Paul, I know that if he were able to ride more consistently and on his own authority it would go a long way in helping him to overcome some of his mental struggles and sense of isolation."*

*---- Elyse Kruse, wife*

Paul Kruse was freshly graduated from high school in Wisconsin Dells, WI, when the events of 9/11 tragically unfolded and he found himself wanting to make a difference. Unsure what he wanted at the time, and knowing school wasn't his thing, he worked a few factory jobs before learning he wanted more out of life. In 2002, Paul joined the United States Army to find the purpose and direction he was looking for.

Paul chose Military Police as his specialty and went to Fort Leonard Wood, MO, for basic and individualized training and then moved and attached to two different bases within the next three years. In 2005, one year

after arriving at Fort Richardson, AK, his Company received orders for a year's deployment to Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan. While law enforcement duties were what was required of him in the states, MP's were often used as combat support; and therefore, Paul did whatever they needed of him. He filled convoy holes as a Driver/Gunner, rucked rough, mountainous terrain on perimeter patrols, conducted checkpoint and tower security, and trained the Afghan National Army. The physical demands of the jobs took their toll on his neck, back and knees; but at the time, he believed himself young and resilient and didn't think of the years ahead filled with damage done today. He "enjoyed" his time in Afghanistan and recalls his experience as mostly quiet and uneventful, quickly noting his good fortune compared to others.

Paul was proud to serve his Country and appreciated the many people and places he encountered. He renewed his contract and was reassigned to another two different bases in the two years that followed. Upon landing in Fort Riley, KS, Paul was quickly made a Team Leader and began training for deployment to Iraq. Having had one successful deployment under his belt, he looked forward to his next 18 months in Iraq training the Iraqi Police and, again, doing whatever was asked of him.

In June, 2008, Paul landed in both a country and war unlike anything he'd experienced before. Although the U.S. had seized control of Baghdad and efforts were underway to withdraw from the country, it was still a large, volatile area fraught with violence, danger and death. He stationed his first six months at Combat Outpost Callahan, a converted shopping center in Adhamiyah, then transferred to a Joint Security Station in Ur for another six months of primitive living conditions and spent his last three months at Camp Taji. Working both base and convoy security, his Outpost came under frequent mortar, RPG and sniper attacks. He watched as his fellow soldiers were injured and died in IED strikes all too near to him. Foot patrols through villages imprinted a deep anxiety within Paul, and visions of bombings and death imparted a growing depression he tried hard to ignore. Rucking long hours in the rough terrain aggravated his developing degenerative spine disease and further wore down his knees. As Team Leader, the responsibility for others weighed heavily on Paul: he kept the mission and their safety in the forefront and persevered through the pain and demons growing within. His second combat deployment complete, he returned to Fort Riley, KS where, exhausted and in pain, he pushed away the searing memories, resumed his MP duties and, with his bike on base, rode as much as he could. Paul never viewed the military as a career option and, after nine years of active duty, he separated in 2011 with minimal transitional support. Needing to move forward again with purpose, Paul used his passion for riding to do just that.

As a young kid, having a dad who rode was cool; and Paul's loved the ride for as long as he can remember. He got his license at 16, bought a bike and rode wherever he could. After separating, Paul took his bike to Phoenix, AZ, used his GI Bill to attend the Motorcycle Mechanics Institute and joined the American Legion Riders. Although he left the stability and camaraderie he valued in the Army, he found a similar structure in Arizona and thrived as a result. Paul graduated MMI in 2012 and relocated to Milwaukee for his first Service Technician job; unfortunately, his demons relocated as well and, without the structure and support he needed, he struggled. Anger and frustrations reared as he wrestled with the work, causing him to lose his job and the confidence to find another Technician position. He struggled to hold jobs, manage his mood swings and build relationships. To deal with life and the burdens he carried, Paul rode his beloved Harley to soothe his mind and find strength to move forward.

In 2013 an E-Harmony connection introduced him to his wife, Elyse. Almost immediately they bonded in riding together and quickly fell in love. Elyse learned to patiently guide his transitions and developed thoughtful strategies to support and communicate with Paul. In 2016, Paul sold his bike to finance their wedding; and as the years progressed they drew strength from each other, expanded their family and kept Elyse home with their children. Paul finds joy in hunting, fishing and camping; and while he knew a piece of himself was missing without a bike, he put the needs of his family of six above his dream of having another bike.

As his pain and struggles advanced, Paul sought care for the degenerative disease affecting his neck, back and knees, but quietly grappled with his invisible demons. This past year has been a hard but liberating one as he bravely began addressing his depression and anxiety. As part of his plan, and after seven years as a full-time Size Press Operator at a local packaging mill, Paul resigned to focus on his overall health needs. We met him eight hours after completing his very last night shift, grateful for the chance to start a new life chapter. And learning he'd be the next recipient of Harley-Davidson from Hogs For Heroes...well, that news couldn't have come at a better time for Paul, or Elyse.

Paul had applied for our gift twice before; but on this third time, he found the courage to speak of his mental health struggle and the toll service had taken on both his body and mind. We could hear his passion for riding and the need to move forward... and our Advisory Board knew our gift to Paul would provide more than just a motorcycle. Paul's training and heart quickly led him to a beautiful 2021 H-D Road Glide in Gauntlet Gray Metallic that just happened to be sitting on Doc's Harley-Davidson showroom floor, making this the third bike we bought from Doc's in three days. Doc's again generously stretched our dollar to make this dream come true under budget...and then jumped at the chance to host our "Trifecta Gifting"! Join us Saturday, May 6, at Doc's H-D in Bonduel, WI at 12:00 pm for the year's first Presentation of Keys, as we gift three bikes to change the lives of Veteran Recipients #32, #33 and Paul, #34 with the healing gift of wind therapy.