

“Surgeries salvaged me and I worked my way back to normality. Motorcycling has helped me feel normal and whole again.”

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**Introducing Recipient #35:
Army Veteran Derek Gagne of Seymour, W**

Derek Gagne grew up “a yoooper” in Wilson, Michigan, and spent most of his adolescence and early adult life in the Hannahville Indian Community, a Potawatomi tribal reservation just west of Escanaba. As a student, he enjoyed history and worked to understand Tribal Council operations; and, he loved sports. An All-State athlete in track, cross-country, football and basketball, it was the latter that really grabbed his heart and garnered attention. In addition to basketball dreams, Derek had wanted to join the military since he was a child enthralled with patriotic family stories and superheroes; and after 9/11’s events, he knew it was his turn to do something about it. He joined the Army National Guard as a 17 year-old junior in high school, graduated a year later and left for boot camp in July, 2005...delaying his basketball scholarship to UW-Madison, because he loved his Country more and wanted first to serve.

While at Ft. Leonard Wood, MO, Derek chose Military Police to enhance his goal of working within the F.B.I.; and following training, was attached to the 46th MP Company at the Kingsford Armory in Michigan. Learning he would deploy in a year, Derek took pre-law classes, started a mowing business and trained both in preparation for deployment and his basketball commitment upon returning. In July, 2006, he went first to Fort Dix, N.J. for specific mission training and then was off to Iraq. He was full of dreams and purpose, and was determined to make a difference in war; but this soon-to-be, two-time Purple Heart and Bronze Star Medal Recipient had no idea just what exactly that would mean.

In October, 2006 Derek landed in southeast Baghdad at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Rustamiyah: a former Iraqi military academy and the subject of frequent insurgent attacks. There he trained Iraqi Police and Iraqi Military to strengthen the country’s own forces. On armed patrols with an interpreter, he’d interact with citizens and children, often sharing candy and balls from home, because he liked the personal interaction. He took on more convoy shifts to stay busy, worked out, played basketball on base and taught the area’s children how to play as well. On November 21, 2006, while walking across base, a mortar sailed through the sky and struck mere feet from him. His ears ringing and hit with several shrapnel pieces himself, Derek proceeded to pull two unconscious soldiers from the

aftermath. After obtaining medical care, he declined the offer to be sent home wanting, instead, to complete his deployment. He lost 90% of his hearing in his left ear that day and earned his first Purple Heart. While still recovering two days later, he lost a Brother to a sniper: a friend who was covering Derek's patrol shift in town and talking with the kids Derek interacted with. Survivors Guilt plagues him to this day; and the engraved name bracelet he wears in tribute is a daily reminder of what he still calls his hardest loss. Unfortunately, those reminders and losses wouldn't stop there.

He resumed his duties as quickly as possible to keep his mind focused on the mission and inherent dangers. On January 22, 2007, Derek's Humvee headed to Camp Victory near the Baghdad International Airport for re-arming, a common maintenance need for the vehicle's layered safety. They removed their outer layers and glass; and while waiting for the vehicle's service completion, the crew enjoyed the luxuries of Taco Bell and Starbucks on base. At the end of the day, and without time for the necessary replacements, Derek's team and Humvee were sent back to FOB Rustamiyah with plans to return the following day to complete the job. They drove back in full night-vision mode; and just ten minutes from base, Derek saw the flash from afar, yelled "brace" and felt his world go dark as the fired EFP (Energy Force Projectile) blasted his weakened vehicle.

Shockingly, Derek maintained consciousness and began yelling out to his team. He couldn't see anything: it was dark and he had lost his vision, along with part of his scalp and his nose. Bloodied and blind, he got out of the vehicle and, struggling to bear weight, hopped on his right leg to find his team. Feeling his way around the vehicle, he dragged his team leader out first, then pulled out his deceased interpreter, and despite his efforts, was unable to find his driver's body. Others arrived to help and then sped the injured back to FOB Rustamiyah: a base which happened to be under simultaneous attack. Derek remained aware of everything going on and desperately tried to stay alert. His body was again riddled with shrapnel, a portion of his face was missing and both of his lower extremities were critically damaged. Two hours later he was medevaced to the U.S. Military Hospital in Balad, Iraq for stabilizing surgery, then sent on to Germany where they amputated his right leg below the knee (the very one he hopped on to pull out his Brothers) and part of his left foot and lower leg. They revived him twice during his operation and, believing he would eventually die, sent him stateside to Walter Reed Army Medical Center to be closer to family. For his efforts in combat, the Army honored his injuries and sacrifice with a second Purple Heart and his heroic service with a Bronze Star Medal.

Derek was stronger than anyone imagined and he pulled through his most critical days. He endured multiple surgeries to repair his facial injuries and rebuild his nose, remove shrapnel and reconfigure both of his lower extremities. They told him he would be at Walter Reed for six years to recover and rehabilitate: it took him nine months. They told him he would walk in two years; and with the prosthesis he was given for his right leg, he walked in three months and he ran in six. He left the hospital with over 130 pieces of shrapnel still in his body, a partial left foot, a new functioning nose, and a disfigured left eye that he can only see light and dark out of. He had, in fact, been amazingly salvaged together; and, grateful for his life, began finding his new normal.

Home in Michigan and having lost his dream of playing college ball, Derek took to the court anyway. He learned how to play again, though not as quick as he once was, and eventually began coaching. Determined to drive, he tackled his truck's manual transmission and then, having watched his dad race for years, took to the track himself in his Purple Heart Express. Racing honed his driving and depth perception skills and positively influenced his mental health progression. He took college classes and gained two degrees in Business Management and Marketing; yet struggled to find employment where his qualifications weighed heavier than his appearance. He learned to advocate for his needs and rights, then politically supported those of his Brothers and Sisters, and eventually became Commander for his Hannahville American Legion. He worked hard to return to himself and help others see him as "a normal guy"; and in doing so found love with Tabitha and married in 2017. Tabitha had long dreamed of owning a small hobby farm; and so the two moved to Seymour, Wisconsin in 2020 to raise animals on their 10 acre property, remodel the old farmhouse that went with it, and nurture their family of five. Tabitha was also a Harley-riding woman; and after years of Derek tinkering with her bike, she inspired him to return to riding.

Motorcycling was Derek's main mode of transportation from 14 to 19 years old, but after having been injured at 20, the State removed his endorsement. He practiced first on Tabitha's bike and then retook the Riding Academy class at the closest dealership: Vandervest Harley-Davidson in Green Bay, WI. After passing with flying colors and regaining his endorsement, he took her Heritage Softail on the road to perfect his skill and started dreaming about buying his own bike and the chance to ride together. Unfortunately, farm life, animal care and old-home restoration has cost more than they thought and pushed back their saving plans for a bike for Derek. Hogs For Heroes admired this man's determination and ability to overcome obstacles; and we believed it was time he returned to the

road and a passion that makes him feel whole— on his own bike and on his own authority.

We joined a family dinner and quickly learned Derek is a humble soul who laughs and smiles frequently. He is an open book, intelligent and compassionate; and, his favorite color is pink. When asked about his dream bike, he immediately said Street Glide and asked to work again with Vandervest Harley-Davidson. Our VVHD friends just happened to have exactly what he was looking for on their showroom floor: a beautiful 2021 Street Glide in Billiard Red, and they generously brought that sweet ride into our budget. As this surreal moment unfolded, Derek shared his plan for someday adding a Captain America paint theme to the perfectly colored bike, noting his love of the comic since he was six. When questioned further, he shared, “ because he’s human, not invincible: he has superhuman strength and speed, with weaknesses”. Derek’s nickname in the Army was Captain America.

This bike is rolling out compliments of Wisconsin’s International Union of Operating Engineers Local 139. Hosting both a Golf Outing and a Poker Run for us last year, this stunning force raised enough to fully sponsor the gifting of this bike. Amazingly, this is the fifth bike they’ve fully sponsored. Excited to celebrate with us, Vandervest H-D in Green Bay, WI, will host Derek’s **Presentation of Keys on Saturday, May 13, 2023 at 12:00 pm.** Come early and hang late— they will be offering a donation lunch to raise funds for us! We can’t wait to put this deserving Veteran on his own Harley and help him reclaim a little more of the man he is.