



Introducing our 40th Veteran Recipient: Army National Guardsman & Army Reservist, Bryan Knez of Oostburg, WI

Bryan Knez, of Oostburg, Wisconsin, is a life-long Wisconsinite who has had a life-long desire to serve his Country and his community. Bryan hails from a strong, brave line of paternal service, and immense sacrifice, to our Nation's military. His father, an Army Vietnam Veteran, served in-country, moving in and out of Bien Hoa Air Base to assess the Army's artillery strike accuracy. On three different occasions he had been shot down as they flew into still volatile areas after recent destruction. His paternal grandfather, also an Army Veteran, invaded both Anzio, Italy, and the infamous Omaha beach, Normandy, during WWII and sustained gunshot wounds during both invasions. The stories from both idols of guts, glory and great loss flowed within their family for as long as Bryan can remember, as did the subsequent struggles with physical health and deeply invasive memories and emotions. Bryan grew up with nothing but admiration and pride for his personal heroes, keeping their medals under his childhood mattress, and he patriotically dreamt of his turn to join the Army, and fight if needed, for our Country, its security and our freedoms.

As Bryan grew in years, faith and character, he vowed a life of purpose and one that focused on helping others: he just didn't know how to get there amongst the obstacles. School wasn't really his thing and so, at age 17, he enrolled in the Army National Guard and attended Basic Training between his junior and senior years. Upon graduating high school in 1997, Bryan left for Ft. Lee, Virginia, to finish training and became a Unit Supply Specialist. He returned home to Marshfield, WI to align with the Guard's 120th Field Artillery Regiment and began juggling life demands between military and civilian commitments. During this time he tried different college courses and worked several jobs looking for the fit he sought. Along the way he picked up additional Guard training and roles in both the Armory and Military Police; and while working a civilian security job, he learned it was police activity that made him happy. But after four years of struggling to gain employer support for his Guard requirements, a frustrated Bryan eventually transferred to the Inactive Ready Reserve List in 2001 to find a new direction. When 9/11 ravaged our Country months later, Bryan saw his new opportunity to participate in the fight that was coming. A timely call in late 2002 from the Army Reserves Recruiter gave him the opening he was looking for and offered him the long-desired chance to transition to Military Police. What Bryan didn't realize was that he was joining a Garrison Support Unit whose primary focus was to facilitate Army Reserves personnel in combat deployment. In January 2003, before he was even able to reclassify, Bryan's Unit received orders for a 30 month domestic deployment to Wisconsin's Fort McCoy that would interrupt his formal path to Military Police. It would also remove any chance to deploy to war and further his family's historic, and proud, participation in combat.

Some military personnel have little choice but to be in a support role and serve stateside; and these support roles are crucial to the success of missions worldwide. Nonetheless, it was an order that left Bryan feeling slighted and guilty to this day for not deploying to our Nation's two concurrent wars. Fort McCoy, an Army Installation, was one of our nation's "power projection platforms" who generated and mobilized the forces and resources required for Operation Iraqi Freedom and then moved those forces where they were needed. Now assigned as the Unit Armorer, Bryan managed the inventory, intake and dispersal of the Base's weaponry for soldiers leaving and returning to Fort McCoy and he repaired the guns damaged in war. Every day, for 30 months, he saw and facilitated preparations for war and combat's tools... and every day he interacted with soldiers preparing to depart, and those returning from war...and every day he not only wished he was one of them, he felt guilty for not being with them.

As nobody has just one role in the military, the Corporal found himself assuming Military Police functions and base patrol more often than not, despite the lack of formal training or title. Ironically, of all the drill work and physical labor he'd done as both a Guardsman and a Reservist that could cause injury, while building a display cabinet on base one day Bryan simply turned wrong, heard the "snap" and felt the immediate searing pain of a torn ACL on his left knee. Nothing heroic, nothing unusual or even demanding: just a freak injury while on active duty. The damage, unfortunately, was significant with cartilage pulling away from the bone; and it was an injury that would severely impact the rest of his life. Unable to extend his leg, and with increasing pain, he underwent surgery later that year, followed by another in 2004 and a third in 2005, all while still deployed and working at Fort McCoy. He took on more desk work, managed the Armory and continued limited patrol functions while recovering, but the injury's toll had already affected his leg's range of motion and began compromising his lower back. After developing three blood clots from his last surgery, a lab test detected an unknown clotting disorder and, with his contract's renewal coming due, the diagnosis wouldn't allow reenlistment. There went his dreams of becoming an MP, of deploying for combat, and of retiring from the military...and there began the next several, pain-filled roller coaster years.

Upon separating in 2005, Bryan married the love of his life, Christina, and, still happily together 22 years later, bought a home to begin building their family in Marshfield, WI. When the financial crisis of 2008 hit simultaneously with Bryan losing his job, the couple was left scrambling and juggling multiple jobs simply to keep a roof over their heads. All the while they toiled to make ends meet, Bryan's knee pain remained a constant presence; in fact, it only worsened. Still unable to fully extend his left leg after three surgeries, his compensating body mechanics deteriorated his other knee, further strained his lower back and inflamed his sciatic nerves. As much as he pushed through, the erratic and painful toll was hard on their family life; and understandably, Bryan needed a stable income and longed for a job that gave him purpose. His dreams of becoming a police officer and serving others came back to him as he considered what made him happy; and, despite a hiring low in the profession, together he and his wife made the tough choice to invest in themselves.

In 2010 Bryan used his GI Bill to attend Nicolet Technical College Law Enforcement Academy, roughly three hours from their home, while his wife and three children stayed behind. Without means for rent, he lived in his van for months then negotiated work in exchange for a room. The decision was ultimately best for their family, but in the interim they remained buried in a growing pile of bills, had their home foreclosed upon, and struggled to keep utilities on and food on the table. Bryan moved through and excelled in every physical and psychological challenge despite his painful limitations; and in 2011, he finally secured a Patrol Officer position with the Sheboygan Police Department. He worked and lived apart from his family for another year before saving enough to move them all to Oostburg, WI; and then they began the uphill struggle of rebuilding themselves financially. He served with SPD for seven years, then transitioned to the Sheboygan County Sheriff's Department in 2018 where he is currently a Deputy Sheriff. After years of searching and effort, Bryan finally found the niche that fills his heart and mind in service to his community.

Pain is a part of Bryan's daily life; and as a role model to his children, he's fought through and tackled life to teach them strength and determination. In law enforcement there is great physical and mental strain inherent in the job; and as much as he's learned to live with it, there are stressful and tense moments at home as he decompresses and settles his aching body. He relies on his faith and busy schedule to fill his heart and mind, on his family for joy and love, and on exercise to maintain his physical capabilities. With a servant's heart, the Deputy Sheriff not only works full time to meet the safety needs of his community, he is also a SWAT team member, a Special Events Team (riot response) member, a Peer Support provider, and he responds to Crisis Intervention requests involving Veteran mental health calls. Amongst all of this he adds in volunteer activities with Veteran organizations, youth groups and in community education. And up until 2021, he relied on his motorcycle to provide him mind-clearing freedom, stress and pain relief, and camaraderie.

Bryan grew up listening to his dad's stories of riding back in the day and he longed for the day when he, too, would take to the road. A benefit of working on a farm, he first learned to ride on dirt bikes; and he rode as much as he could, and on roads he shouldn't have been. As he got older, he'd occasionally borrow bikes to grab a few miles and dream for the day; but after several hard years of life's knocks, it wasn't until 2013 when he bought his first and only bike: a used Honda CBR. The relief, joy and life balancing it provided him was like no other. He rode in Veterans events and with friends, he rode to release his burdens and decompress from police work, and he rode simply to forget his ever present pain—until that became too much to even ride. In 2021 Bryan made the tough decision to sell his sport bike because his back pain could no longer tolerate its riding position; and while he hoped to save for a bagger, life has gotten in the way. He's the first to tell you he will always put the needs of his family first— children and aging parents, before spending money on himself. Despite a more stable income for his family, his past financial scars remain a constant fear today; and without a motorcycle in his life, managing his pain and his own mental health has become more challenging. While our gift is not an award for service, we couldn't help but appreciate Bryan's dedication to such. After working to serve others, providing support at the worst of times, and placing his own life on the line day in and day out, Hogs For Heroes believed regaining the healing benefits of wind therapy would help this Veteran stay on the good path he's developed for himself, his family and his community.

Bryan never saw us coming: when we asked to sit at his large table, he authoritatively told us “no, we have friends coming”. When we told him that we were, in fact, his new friends, the stoic, reserved man put his face in his hands and took a minute. As we spent the night learning more about each other and sharing in laughs, we asked Bryan what kind of bike he was thinking about: “Street Glide”. And when we pressed about favorite colors, he responded “something that stands out, like that Viper color”. We knew exactly the rare beast Bryan was talking about for his first Harley...and darned if his local dealership, West Bend Harley-Davidson, didn't have that dream bike sitting in the back. They had just taken in this extra-loaded 2021 Street Glide Special in Snake Venom; and when the WBHD team learned it was for a Hogs For Heroes recipient, our amazing friends took down that price *significantly* to make it fit our budget.

Despite our goal of gifting one Harley a year, Bryan is our 40th Veteran Recipient in just over seven years of gifting Harleys, he is the last Recipient of 2023, and our ninth of this year alone. We are thrilled, and humbled, to be at this point on our small nonprofit's path; and we thank all of our Supporters for your collective part in this overwhelming force of good. Please join us for his **Presentation of Keys Ceremony on Saturday, September 2, 2023 at 2:30 pm at West Bend Harley-Davidson in West Bend, WI** during their annual Milwaukee Rally festivities. We will be hanging out to talk with you from 1:00 pm - 7:00 pm with live music, vendors, bikes and refreshments on the dealership's grounds. Ride on over to help welcome Bryan, #40, back to The Road and share in the gratitude we have for all Veterans as we change the life of this one.