



Introducing Recipient #42: Army Sergeant Joshua Perkins of Suring, Wisconsin

Joshua Perkins, of Suring, WI, was barely able to hang on, let alone reach the pegs, when he jumped on his first of many rides with his Dad. The thrill immediately took root in every fiber of his young being and created a lifelong passion. His parents told him he couldn't buy a motorcycle until he was on his own and could pay for his own insurance; and so, Joshua bided his time planning. In 1995, he was a senior in high school sitting in the school's auditorium one day, unexpectedly enthralled with the Army Recruiter's patriotic speech and description of life in the Army. A career, freedom, guns, travel...and a paycheck? It checked every box for excitement and independence; and he enlisted in the U.S Army.

Boot camp was tough on the Infantryman: a broken wrist just six months prior was re-injured by the physical demands of training. Joshua's spirit was determined and focused on success; and he pushed through the physical challenge and pain it caused to earn his place. With Advanced Individual Training complete, he no sooner landed at Fort Riley, Kansas, when he withdrew his first \$1,000 from a very sparse account to buy his first motorcycle. He left the lot with no idea how to ride and racked up hours practicing and building his passion. It wasn't much of a bike, but it was the start he could afford and the next step toward the Harley dream and culture he wanted.

The months rolled on and in August, 1996, while training in the Mojave Desert, Joshua jumped off a 5-ton truck and struck his tailbone on a metal protrusion which required six months of rehabilitation. The jarring back injury, compounded later by years of gear and service demands, caused the degenerative back pain he deals with today. Again determined to soldier on, he didn't let it hold him back, then or now. Young and anxious for the experiences the Recruiter sold, and without responsibility or dependents to concern himself with, the then 19 year old eagerly looked toward his first deployment.

In 1997, Joshua headed to Bosnia for seven months on a "peace-keeping" mission. Though the Bosnian War was technically over, the country remained viciously challenged by religious factions, violence and death. Snipers, caches of destructive weaponry, and terrain littered with landmines were more common than not, as was the brutal public killing and bombing of civilians. Unprepared for the sights and actions required of him, Joshua quickly learned to push away the emotions and anxiety and to focus on the job at hand. Unfortunately, the invasive memories would settle deep within and patiently wait for their chance to reappear. Upon his return to Fort Riley, although leadership made it a point to offer counseling to the group for the traumatic experience, it was his motorcycle that offered him the therapy he needed. Joshua rode as much as he could to release the demons and clear his mind of the strain they created. Wanting more power in his ride, he upgraded to a Honda CBR 900 soon thereafter, reveling in the adrenaline it created and the control it required, but never losing sight of his "someday" dream.

Joshua was back just a few months before he left for a one-year tour to South Korea which, by comparison, was a "piece of cake" providing security escort for a Colonel on base. His weekends were typically free; and he hiked to clear his mind and achieved his Black Belt for physical release. He returned home refreshed and settled, and jumped back on his bike to keep it that way. Joshua finished out his contract and, wanting a college education, transitioned into the Army National Guard in 1999.

Joshua moved into civilian life juggling construction jobs, classes and Guard commitments all while still riding to stay focused and fulfilled. Adjustment was awkward: social interactions and communication were different from Army life, but he adapted with time and his quiet nature. One day in the campus bookstore, Joshua saw a woman who took his breath away; and almost immediately realized the hole in his life—love. He joined the campus security team for the chance to meet and work with her; and four months later, he made Erika his wife and welcomed her two children as his own. They settled comfortably into their new family; and Joshua loved the blended life they created. The couple enjoyed riding together and made date-rides a priority...until the weight of bills and the need for a family minivan required Joshua sell his motorcycle. Heartache aside, the couple focused on their educational paths and expanding their family; and when they longed for time on the road, the two would borrow his father's motorcycle to strengthen their marriage and shape their dreams. In 2005, Joshua was nearing the completion of his contract when he learned his separation would be denied by a stop-loss order and he would, instead, quickly deploy to Iraq for one year. That very same day Erika would tell him she was expecting their first child together.

In June, 2005, two months after orders, Joshua landed at Camp Navistar, Kuwait. From there he would provide convoy security and lead a squad throughout Iraq delivering supplies to other bases. Two weeks after boots on the ground, their Company lost two men to IEDs: and from that point on, the constant barrage of attacks and unending flow of injuries and casualties quickly became his horrific norm. They rolled across war-torn land that highlighted its aftermath amongst the dead and destroyed. Their convoy line was typically two miles long, often moving at night to minimize threats the public posed. RPG's and roadside IED's dotted their paths, some noticeable and avoidable, others were not. Joshua spent hours sitting in highly-targeted convoys, paralyzed by radio calls from soldiers ahead and behind him under attack. Guilt, frustration and angst grew as emotions of long ago mixed with the grisly of today. And then they'd move again, staying at different bases in tents or connex quarters in the hot, arid country, only to repeat the same tense cycle over and over. For a year.

As if Joshua's daily life didn't have enough pressure, his youngest brother, a member of his Guard Unit, deployed with him to the same base. They traveled in separate convoys and different routes with little time together; but ever the protector, Joshua increasingly fretted over the safety of his family, here and back there. On January 3, 2006 at 0300, his two different worlds collided and Joshua was awoken to listen in as his first daughter was born. Amongst the horrors of war, he found himself tearful with joy for the new life that was his; and equally angered for the missed opportunity and another toll taken. Without the ability to control or impact much, his mind began wandering with thoughts of "what if" for all he cared about and felt responsible for; and he could feel the anger building deep within. And then...he began questioning "the whys". All Joshua could do was turn to his faith for strength and prayed for the safety of all he loved and cared about. His prayers seemingly answered, he completed his deployment and returned home.

Returning home was everything Josh had prayed for: he'd made it home intact, along with his brother. His reunion with his wife and family, and first embrace with his daughter, filled his pained heart. His contract now ended, Joshua quickly closed that chapter, sealing its pages deeply within, and refocused on building their lives outside of service. He struggled finding good work and moved through different construction projects to make ends meet, growing more irritable each time. Although grateful to be home, he couldn't understand the challenge in fitting back in. His temper was short, his patience lacking and his communications hurt others more than they helped—all of which began damaging family bonds. Joshua struggled silently: choosing not to talk about his time or the memories that plagued him or the anger that filled him. Despite the joy in welcoming their fourth child, home life grew tense and familial interactions strained further under an invisible hold he wouldn't release. Joshua turned to alcohol and smoking to cope with his pain and anger, both of which deteriorated his already fragile family relationships. It wasn't until he hit his rock bottom and was on the brink of losing all he loved that he finally acknowledged his struggle and sought help from the VA. In 2016, Joshua again summoned a faith that had been greatly tested and surrendered his life to his Lord's will for guidance.

Joshua has since done his best to only move forward. With years of counseling, he's learned healthy coping mechanisms that keep his PTSD in check. He found steady employment as a Sawyer at the local lumber mill with a group he enjoys working with. Josh worked hard to rebuild trust and acceptance with his children; and he and Erika attended marriage counseling to restore their relationship. Realizing he still needed a different kind of therapy—one for his heart, mind and soul, Joshua finally bought his first Harley and regained the healing joy that a dream-come-true can offer. Erika loves riding almost as much as he does, and together they again found peace and healing on the road. With an improved understanding of himself and his traumatic experiences, he began volunteering within his church, his children's school and within the nursing home. As his passion for serving others rose, he pursued his Masters Degree in Biblical Studies. Amongst the many good steps forward he was making, life with growing kids and a home in need of repairs eventually required he sell his Harley to pay the bills. Arguably his hardest day ever, it was the right and responsible choice; and the couple set upon a plan to save for their next bike. Unfortunately life has done nothing but intervene these past four years to exhaust their "someday" savings. Hogs For Heroes believed it was time we intervened instead.

Joshua loves spending time with their four children, two of whom are still in high school, and their three spirited grandchildren. Outside of work at the lumber mill and as his congregation's Youth Director, he enjoys fishing, kayaking and disc golf. He considers his life full and blessed, but there remains a hole in his heart without riding. While we hand over keys to just one person, it was clear to our Advisory Board that the healing our gift provides would not only help Joshua stay on the good path he's forged, it would further invest in their marriage and family. Joshua never saw us coming, but we were an answer to one of the many prayers he's offered up. He's long dreamed of a touring bike to comfortably take them on longer trips; and it just so happened that his local dealer, Doc's Harley-Davidson in Bonduel, WI, had a plethora of beautiful bikes to choose from. His struggle was picking which fabulous color captured his

heart: and in the end it was his love of chrome, and joy in polishing it, that connected him to the 2021 Ultra Limited in Midnight Crimson, with only 6,000 miles on it. Our friends at Doc's not only made this dream come true for Joshua, but brought that bike in under budget for us. That means more fuel for the next Bike and Veteran pairing.

Friends, it's going to be a Double Gifting! Joshua will be our 42nd Recipient in just eight years of gifting Harleys and he will receive his keys in a joint ceremony with our 43rd Recipient on **Saturday, May 11 at The Schoolhouse Bar in Mountain, WI**— a point in between his home in Suring and that of his new Brother's in Three Lakes, Wisconsin. The **Presentation of Keys Ceremony will start at 12:00**, but we'll start hanging out at 11:00. Come on over and catch up with friends old and new as we honor all of our Veterans by supporting the lives of these two. Thrilled with the chance to host and support our mission, the Schoolhouse Bar will have a donation lunch available and will share the proceeds with us!