



## **Meet Our Next Veteran Recipient: #49 Army Veteran Brandon Wheaton of Appleton, Wisconsin**

Brandon Wheaton was born and raised in Appleton, Wisconsin. He played soccer, camped with his family and “just hung” with friends far outside the popular crowd. School was a challenge; and with his ADHD complicating things, Brandon attended summer programs to get by. Along the way he learned, instead, that he was good with his hands and mechanically inclined; and so he focused on working from an early age. Once a senior in high school, he finally got Lauren to agree to a date after spending the past few years pursuing her. Brandon graduated in 2003 and jumped full time into the workforce, moving through jobs in construction and car mechanics. Having dreamt of riding since childhood, he got his endorsement and borrowed his future father-in-law’s Sportster until a few years later when this same man bought him his first bike: a Suzuki Katana 600. Brandon rode everywhere, and with his girl on back. The two married in 2006; and in 2008, they excitedly welcomed their first of two sons. Unfortunately, our Country’s economy and labor market negatively shifted that same year adding to their financial strain. After struggling to find work that offered their family a stable income, the young couple decided Brandon would enlist in the Army as a Wheeled Vehicle Mechanic.

There was never a “dream” or a “sense of duty” or “patriotic devotion” that led him to this decision; it was truly about a paycheck he could depend on for his family by doing a job he was good at. In 2010, at age 24, Brandon left his wife and 2 year-old son for bootcamp and specialty training, then stationed at Joint Base Lewis-McChord (JBLM) outside Tacoma, WA, with his young family. Right after arriving, Lauren’s father’s terminal condition claimed his life sooner than expected, and she wasn’t there. Brandon flew home to mourn the man who treated him like a son, and returned to carry the guilt of moving his family away for the sake of a job. Though Brandon wouldn’t realize it at the time, the emotional death began a six year military career that focused on guilt, loss and injury; and the job he took to pay the bills, would eventually leave him fully and permanently disabled. That same job, however, would turn into a life-long devotion and deep pride for his Country, his Brothers & Sisters in Arms and his time in service.

Brandon settled into military life, benefiting from the routine and discipline, and very quickly gained a brotherhood he didn’t know was missing. Finding riders within his Unit, he bought a Yamaha R6 to join the group rides and he built stronger bonds and found personal release. Loving his new calling, Brandon reenlisted and rose in rank. When their Unit lost a former Squad Leader, it was riding with his military family that gave him strength and comfort. When he tore his knee meniscus running in drills and needed surgery, it was his team that moved him around Base. When Brandon fractured both legs in a dirt bike accident, it was his brotherhood who supported and encouraged his recovery. And when he got deployment orders to Afghanistan, it was leaving with his Battalion that gave him the courage he needed to leave his wife and two young sons for war. In March, 2013, Brandon sold his motorcycle for the extra cash his family would need and kissed them goodbye. Just days later he landed at the massive Kandahar Airfield where he’d spend the next seven months supporting Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF).

Brandon’s Platoon, as part of his JBLM Combat Aviation Brigade, was charged with the maintenance of their ground vehicles. While most of his time was spent behind the wire, war came to the base...frequently. Daily mortar attacks and frequent perimeter breach lockdowns threatened base safety; and it left him anxious and hypervigilant. The vehicles Brandon saw were often damaged by gunfire or explosives; and he pondered the injuries his Brothers sustained and the lives he’d never meet. The more he saw and heard, and the more his mind wandered, the more guilt Brandon took on: guilt for being in a supportive role, guilt

for not doing more in war, guilt for being away from his family, and guilt for living relatively safely while so many others did not. As part of his Base comforts, and a detriment in hindsight, Brandon owned a cell phone to stay in frequent communications with his wife. While it comforted his homesick heart in the moment, it made it harder to be away; and having a foot in the problems and demands of both worlds, with so little control in either, further messed with his mind.

In June, 2013, Brandon was independently sent to FOB Spin Buldak, in a border town of militant unrest with strategic crossing into Pakistan, for 36 days. He was attached to a Refueling Company to service their trucks while they permanently shut down the Base. Brandon's helicopter had barely landed when, while unloading his gear, he was directed to load a deceased U.S. civilian contractor. It was his first personal introduction to death in war, and it served him a hard welcome. Brandon was the new guy: on his own, without support or communication options, and on a small, basic base. They slept on floor mats, lived with poor sanitation facilities, ate only MRE's and listened to their Howitzer repeatedly launch munitions into nearby mountains. The daily combination provided Brandon a bracing glimpse into the lives others actually led in war...and his anxiety and guilt grew. He stayed focused on his assigned duties and kept his emotions at bay until tasked one night with delivering meals to the Guard Tower. Brandon opened the door to three non-english speaking Guards with three AK-47's rapidly aimed directly at him. Tempers and communications eventually settled, but the experience excoriated his frayed nerves and opened the door to his future night terrors. The "longest 36 days of my life" finally complete, Brandon returned to Kandahar Airfield and quickly settled into its routines and friendships, with a field of traumatic seeds taking root before heading home that October. He arrived stateside safe and intact, feeling equally excited to be with his family and guilty for leaving others behind. He resumed the routines of work and drill, set his sights on advancement, eventually rising to the rank of Sergeant, and reenlisted again...never foreseeing the way his life would unravel in the years to come.

Brandon worked hard to portray a collected front for others, only to release his tension and irritability in the privacy of his home. He returned a stranger to his toddler children: reinserting himself was difficult and his angry outbursts worsened the transition. Over time the physical pains collected from injuries to his back, knees and shoulder made themselves known and nightmares affected his sleep, forcing Brandon to seek medical care. Also over time, three of his Battalion brothers took their lives in suicide after returning from Afghanistan; and Brandon's pain and own dark thoughts became harder to avoid without a release. What he really longed for was the chance to ride again; but in a new house and unable to afford a bike on their limited income, Brandon's anxious and depressed state simply advanced unsupported and undiagnosed.

In late 2015, Brandon developed a cyst on his wrist. Surgery removed it, but recovery affected wrist function, flagged him for a Medical Review Board and caused his anxiety to surge. Roughly two months before Brandon would learn his discharge fate, his close friend took his life on base. The guilt of not knowing, not intervening, not doing more, not asking, not being there...devastated Brandon. He now wears his name, SSGT Naegel, tattooed on his arm. Just as a death started his Army career, another death ended it; and Brandon's tenuous web of loss, guilt and injury quickly began to unravel. It was that incident, however, that allowed Brandon to begin processing his PTSD within the VA as part of his discharge. In August, 2016, Brandon became both a civilian and a disabled Veteran who would eventually reach full and permanent disability after years of contemplating, and attempting, the end of his own pain.

Brandon and Lauren returned to their hometown of Appleton, WI, for the support of family and friends. While his demons were already known to him, they grew more relentless over time and more apparent to others. Those who once knew him couldn't understand who he'd become—and vice versa. He distrusted people and places; and he lost friendships. Communicating with others was hard and frustrating; and as a result, he couldn't keep a job and further isolated himself. His depression fed his irritability and angry outbursts; and on top of all this, Brandon was in physical pain. Since enlisting, he's had three knee surgeries for a meniscus tear during a running drill. He's undergone both a lumbar discectomy and fusion for his degenerative back disease; and recently had a spinal cord stimulator implanted to further relieve his

pain. At some point, his torn rotator cuff, a result of drills and wrenching on vehicles, will require surgery. While the procedures have helped, pain limits his activity, affects his mental health and strains his family dynamics; and the ongoing night terrors certainly don't help. With years of counseling, medications and interventions, Brandon has moved forward and learned much about himself. Still, there are many days that are harder and darker than others because his anxiety and depressive thoughts are never far away. And like so many others out there, after all he has been through and struggles with, he still told us he "would go back in a heartbeat to be with them all".

Brandon's military career wasn't about heroics or some standout incident; it was about taking a job for his family, doing it to the best of his ability, and serving our Country in the full capacity asked of him. He gained far more benefit than imagined; but as a result, he's spent his life since paying for such. Having just celebrated 18 years of marriage, his wife Lauren has been a rock of support, focus and reprieve. It is Brandon's family that, without doubt, gives him the strength to push forward and his two sons are his biggest source of pride. Still, he knows they walk on eggshells because of him; and it further complicates the pain he carries. His disabilities leave him with time on his hands, and while he loves helping friends and volunteering with the school's fishing teams, not being able to work regularly deprives him of an elusive purpose. Brandon has found his heart is happiest when he is helping others work through their own challenges; and while he can more easily talk about their struggles, he still grapples with avoidance and the vulnerability in sharing his own. Brandon is raw and at-risk; and with only a small circle of support, he longs to be understood and belong to something bigger than himself again. Buying a motorcycle is financially out of their tight budget's reach; and so, he occasionally borrows a friend's bike to connect with his passion and dreams of someday joining a Veteran's riding group. By making his "someday" dream come true now, Hogs For Heroes hopes our gift will make a life-changing, if not life-saving, difference for this Veteran.

Sadly our gift of a Harley is not a cure; it is, instead, a tool to support healing. We heard and understood Brandon's story and need; and learning he just faced another desperate struggle in May, we knew our gift could help him now. Our decision took him by surprise and reduced him to tears. He excitedly spent his night searching his local H-D dealerships online and, after test riding models, found his love the very next day. Sitting on the showroom floor of Appleton Harley-Davidson was a gorgeous, loaded 2020 Road Glide Ultra in duo tones of River Rock and Black, with only 5,300 miles on it. Brandon and Lauren both fell hard for this beauty; and our friends at AHD generously made this dream bike fit our budget. Brandon will be H4H Recipient #49 and he will receive his keys during a double gifting with Recipient #50. Join us for our Presentation of Keys Ceremony on Saturday, August 24, 2024 at 1:00 pm at the American Legion Post 75 in Fond du Lac, WI, where we will be hanging out from 11:00 am to 4:00 pm.