



## **Hogs For Heroes Awards Second Harley-Davidson To Disabled Wisconsin Veteran Daniel Tinsley of Fond du Lac**

by Audra Thompson, VP & Co-Founder

### **The Organization.**

HOGS FOR HEROES, started in 2015, is a nonprofit created specifically to get our injured Wisconsin Veteran riders back on The Road with a new Harley-Davidson of their choosing. Our mission is simple: we raise funds to purchase Harleys for Veterans injured, mentally or physically during the course of active duty, in an effort to enhance their healing and readjustment to civilian life with a different form of therapy: that of The Road.

For those who understand the power of the road and the freedom riding provides, there is nothing else like it. Even Sunday drivers on four wheels can appreciate the joy behind the drive. Hogs For Heroes believes that the freedom of the road, the collegiality of riders and the pride and peace found in ownership can support the healing processes for our returning injured Veterans. Presented as a gift from the donating public, the bike reinforces the collective gratitude of our Wisconsin citizens and the hope they make the rough road a little smoother for a deserving Veteran.

One Bike a time. One Hero at a time. That is both our motto and approach. First we raise the funds, then we find the Veteran. We were able to gift our first Harley on May 4, 2016 to Retired Lance Corporal Scott Kruchten of Sun Prairie, Wisconsin during an early Bike Night at Middleton's Quaker Steak and Lube. Hogs For Heroes hopes to give away one bike a year. We were simply stunned to have been the recipients of some incredible donations this summer: enough so that we could open up the application process *again*. Candidates came from throughout the state, across the branches of our Armed Services and as far back in combat service as the Vietnam War. Our Advisory Board reviewed the applications and selected one Veteran from the

many deserving. Without doubt, choosing only one to honor is the hardest part of the work we do.

Our application process uses a defined set of criteria to aid our applicants and Advisory Board in their decision making. We are looking to assist a Wisconsin Veteran who was injured in the course of active duty and honorably discharged. He or she must have a current motorcycle license, be capable of safe operations, and demonstrate a history of motorcycle enthusiasm and/or ownership. Financial need definitely plays a part in our decision making, as do other life hardships that our Veterans often face during their transition back into civilian life. The word Hero is definitely a subjective term, but we consider leadership, community involvement, and self development to be vital components. We require credentials be provided and ask some essay questions that help us better understand the individual. It is not a process for the faint of heart, and we think that helps differentiate candidates who are willing to put a little work and thought into the process. We had *many* deserving Veterans to choose from, but one stood out a little more.

## **The Hero.**

***“First of all, I do not believe I am anymore deserving of such a gift than any of my other brothers or sisters in arms.”*** — Meet Retired Army Sergeant Daniel Tinsley.

It was this quote, his opening statement, that struck our Advisory Board as differentiating. But it was his story, and more importantly his efforts since being medically retired with a 100% service-connected disability at the age 25, a direct result of the incapacitating effects of PTSD and chronic pain, that shaped our decision.

Dan has spent well over half his life living in different Wisconsin cities, sharing his time between a split family, and finally landing in the full and protective custody of his father and step-mother in Mayville, Wisconsin at a young age, and where he eventually returned home to after service. He grew up with motorcycles in his family and teenage fun on dirt and street bikes. He tells stories of his childhood that are rough to hear but quickly notes that “others go through so much worse” than what was his experience. He shares that even early on he drew personal strength from watching others deal with life stresses and credits that as key to his survival in the years to come.

At age 18 Dan joined the Army in an effort to redirect himself from the self-described wild path he was on. He knew he would be deployed; he saw it as his job and was eager for the action and the chance to serve his country. He was head-strong, entitled, and cocky; and within months his Drill Sergeant “readjusted” that perspective, giving him the “ass-kicking” he admits he needed to become a leader and man of character. Deployed in the midst of horrific violence in Iraq, Dan, a Fire Support Specialist, found himself on foot patrols. While analyzing a crater from a prior explosion, the whistling of an impending missile was detected and in just seconds it’s 100 mph blowback sent Dan hurling, forever changing the new father’s life. With 33 pieces of shrapnel imbedded from his neck to his legs, a traumatic brain injury and ruptured eardrums, he was airlifted out for what would become multiple surgeries and a prolonged recovery. In a horrific miscommunication, Dan’s father and Base had both been told he had been killed in action and then subsequently overwhelmed to hear his voice days later. Missing both the action and his fellow warriors, Dan requested transfer back into combat, only to later find his Brigade in the midst of a headline-making attack that left many injured, kidnapped and brutally killed. It was the long 14 months of continual gunfire, the unimaginable daily stress and life risk, the repeated loss of friends, persistent pain, and the enormous burdens of uncontrollable forces and images that left an even deeper, more difficult wound to treat: that of PTSD.

After almost 5 years of service, the Purple Heart recipient returned home in 2009 to rebuild a life he no longer recognized. He was lost, hurt and angry. His family was broken. Divorce left him in financial ruin. His young son didn’t know him. Another child was on the way. Drinking and a dependency on pain medications furthered his depression; he didn’t care if he lived or he died. Lacking support and direction, he found himself nomadic, homeless and hopeless, contemplating suicide on 3 different occasions. Somehow, in the midst of despair, he found motorcycling, bought a Honda, and learned firsthand the real power of The Road. He experienced the brotherhood amongst bikers. His PTSD symptoms were lessened in the face of the wind and his chronic pain soothed by the joy in riding. Literally, he rode that bike until it fell apart. And then he had to stop...riding that is, and personally shifted gears to become someone who mattered in the lives of others.

Our mission is to help our injured and struggling Veterans heal with the therapy of the road. Certainly Dan has his issues: he’s an intense, high-energy and raw man who’s lived a tumultuous, uncertain life and maintains an honest passion for who he is, where he’s been and where he’s headed. He makes no apologies for his direct and persistent approach and balances that with a charismatic and genuine persona. Very self-aware, Dan’s PTSD is a full and constant presence in his life; he has a colorful past and he has his demons. He fights this by diverting his full attention to improving

the lives of others, particularly our Veterans, and using his life experiences as a way to relate and impact change. Relying on his VA and Social Security benefits to pay his bills, he, in turn, shares himself by volunteering full time hours for different Veteran's causes. He became a Drug and Addiction Counselor, mentoring those impacted. He's worked on multiple projects to raise awareness on the issue of Veteran suicide. He was just recently elected Board President for Salute The Troops, a non-profit organization in Fond du Lac, WI, working to provide better living for local Veterans and their families. Without doubt, this gift will be a healing difference in his life. It will provide him focus, involvement, and release and subsequently further enhance his joy in supporting Veteran's causes.

When shopping for his bike, his two children and their need for safety and comfort were foremost in his mind, sharing his excitement to introduce them to the riding lifestyle. He loves and values most his time with his children, Connor, who lives in South Dakota, and Rylee, who lives in Fond du Lac. When he's not volunteering, he enjoys camping, mountain biking and time with his girlfriend Angela, a woman he calls amazing. And while he is now finding his life in a comfortable and stable place, the past continues to haunt his financial security. A modest living and need to put his family first made saving for a Harley a slow process, but he didn't give up the "someday" dream. Hogs for Heroes felt it was time Dan received some of the good will he fosters and decided his "someday" dream needed to happen now.

### **The Bike: Dan's Choice.**

What you choose to ride is as personal as what you choose to wear. It's an expression of you; it has to fit your physical self and one size does not fit all. That is why Hogs For Heroes lets the Veteran choose their new Harley. That's right, they choose, up to a set financial limit. We plan on purchasing new, but if our Veteran walks in and finds a preowned beauty on the floor they want, we are good with that, too. Our intent is to partner with the Harley-Davidson dealership closest to where the Veteran lives in an effort to support local sales, establish a relationship for future service needs and encourage socialization with customers and their affiliated HOG Chapter.

We couldn't have been treated any better and been any more overwhelmed by their enthusiasm and support than what we experienced from the minute we walked through the door, unannounced, at Open Road Harley-Davidson in Fond du Lac. Wow. Personalized and expert sales helped fit Dan with a bike that would comfortably accommodate the residuals of his injuries. He sat on many but eventually found a fully loaded, preowned 2012 Street Glide FLHX with everything that was important to him, some serious pipes and a meticulous history of ownership to boot. When ORHD

offered Dan the chance to have a brand new, stock version of the Street Glide for more money, but still within our budget, Dan respectfully declined. He loved the story of the bike, he was thrilled with the louder pipes and, perhaps most telling of his character, he wanted to “leave something in the bank for the next Veteran”. It was this quote that reinforced our decision that we had chosen the right person for our second bike.

Publicly gifting the bike allows supporters the opportunity to celebrate and honor our Veteran. And on Saturday, September 10, 2016, we did just that at an event ORHD generously hosted for us at their dealership. Dan personally met, and thanked, several supporters and collectively we were able to introduce Hogs For Heroes to many new faces. The crowd was entertained by the great music of a local band, “Double Down”. Lori Thiel, co-owner of ORHD, took the stage, welcomed a Color Guard presentation, and gave an emotional opening that reflected on the 15th Anniversary of 9/11, the horrific loss of life, and the unwavering support of our first responders and military personnel. Hogs For Heroes then took the stage and after sharing Dan’s story, we introduced him to the crowd.

We don’t expect all of our Veteran’s to be comfortable in the spotlight, let alone addressing a crowd. Dan, however, jumped at the chance and spoke emotionally, gratefully and compassionately, anticipating the many life improvements he was about to regain from The Road. In a touching display of Brotherhood, Retired Marine Scott Kruchten, our first Harley recipient, then joined the stage, offered a welcoming hug and helped Dan unveil his Harley. His bike was wheeled outside where Dan was enveloped in a motorcade of 20 bikes manned by varying Veterans groups and supportive citizens, and escorted to Downtown Fond du Lac where he had another volunteer shift to start.

## **Working On The Next Bike.**

There are many honorable causes and obvious community needs to support, but Hogs For Heroes wanted to make a large, impactful difference in a small number of lives rather than a slight difference across many. There is no right or wrong cause here; we are simply different in our approach to help. Our “one at a time” approach allows us to stay small and controlled. *Every dollar donated for the bike goes straight to the bike:* no overhead costs, no paid positions, no fancy gimmicks. We are committed to minimal operating expenses, and those we do have are covered by donations from our Founding Board and in-kind donations from businesses. We are a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization and contributions are tax-deductible. But enough about us, it is you who makes the difference here.

Because of your generosity, we are pleased to say that we are well on our way to awarding our next Harley! Every donated dollar counts and is “the fuel” for our next Bike and Hero pairing. Donations can be processed electronically through Pay Pal on our website or mailed in to our business address. Citizens, businesses and clubs can host third party events, such as rides, golf outings, bowling tournaments, garage sales and BBQs, and then share the proceeds directly with Hogs For Heroes. Simply spreading our word helps us to grow and assist more Veterans in need.

We know people inherently want to help others; and if this cause hits your passion button we hope you will consider supporting us. It is an amazing feeling to know you are making a direct difference in the life of someone who served, and sacrificed, to make a difference in yours.

Follow us on Facebook, Hogs For Heroes and stay up to date with our activity and announcements. More information on the organization and how you can become further involved can be found at: [www.hogsforheroeswi.org](http://www.hogsforheroeswi.org)



Retired Army Sergeant Daniel Tinsley on the bike he chose: a preowned 2012 Street Glide FLHX from Open Road Harley-Davidson in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin.