



Introducing #11: Marine Mark Provencher Jr., of Plymouth, WI

Our Next Veteran Hero to Receive a Harley and the Gift of Wind Therapy

A life-long Plymouth, WI resident, becoming a Marine was simply destined for Staff Sergeant Mark Provencher, Jr. He came from a long line of Marines: service was what he knew and, as a rebellious youth, exactly what he needed. He entered boot camp right after graduating; and while he loved his time in service, he separated after five years to explore what the civilian world had to offer. Mark found work in a factory, friendships, the love of his daughter, and married. But after two years of struggling to find his fit, and feeling he could do more for his Country, he reenlisted and later deployed twice to meet the demands of war. In 2015, after 22 years of service, this combat Veteran retired to be present in his family's lives. Mark was excited to return home with multiple medals, skills and plans, but didn't know he'd be bringing home PTSD, nor was this experienced Marine prepared for how difficult transitioning into the civilian workforce would be.

During his 22 years Mark held many positions, including Marksmanship Instructor, before specializing in Maintenance Management. His first combat deployment was to Iraq in 2003 where he guarded oil lines from thieves and enemies. Fox hole living for months on end, mortars, and drive by shootings repeatedly threatened their lives and operations. After nine months he returned to the States, shut out the searing memories of combat and rough living, and resumed the normalcy of life on base. Though he thrived at work, things became increasingly difficult at home as Mark struggled unknowingly with the symptoms of PTSD. He divorced in 2007 and threw himself into exercise and achieving more at work to avoid the issues at hand.

Mark deployed again in 2009 for another nine month mission to Afghanistan as a Maintenance Management Officer. His Battalion was tasked to help build Camp Leatherneck and run supply convoys to forward camps. Infrastructure and security were minimal making the area a prime target for violence and destruction. Several deaths and horrific injuries of Brothers and friends were forever burned into Mark's heart and mind. Hourly threats and explosions frayed his nerves and created a hypervigilance that still affects him today. And as significant equipment loss impacted operations, the stress of his responsibilities further contributed to the painful toll this unsuspecting Marine would be saddled with the rest of his life. Yet he managed to bury all of that, too, right on top of the other, and carry on with military life. Shortly after returning stateside Mark found his love Amber, a fellow Marine on base. She didn't like him at first; but they quickly fell hard, married in 2011 and added two sons to their lives. He lights up when he speaks of the joy and strength his children give him and holds his wife in an esteemed light. She's a solid, smart, calming force whose eyes smile when she looks at Mark. Together they planned his military retirement, her college pursuits and the supervisory job he lined up as he moved back to Wisconsin.

Just two months after starting his new job Mark was let go. Told his direct communication style was too blunt for the civilian workforce, he was not a fit for their business culture. He aggressively searched for work and found himself in a tailspin with a family of five to provide for and nobody willing to hire him. Frantic and dumbfounded, and with his self esteem at its lowest point, the invisible tentacles of PTSD again knocked on his door. Night terrors ravaged his sleep, anger burst out unexpectedly, and anxiety struck this otherwise confident man as he continued to deny anything was wrong with him. He fought to stay afloat, remain positive and privately manage his struggles. Credit card debt piled up, bills went unpaid and he took jobs for

cash, detailing cars and picking vegetables to make ends meet. Having exhausted their savings and retirement accounts, Mark was broken and his family near homelessness when a friend encouraged him to take a position with the Center for Veterans Issues as a Veterans Advocate. Thinking it a temporary job, the rewards he found were immediate and unimaginable—for both himself and those he worked with. He came to see it as a calling and as a chance to continue serving. Absolutely loving what he does, last year he transitioned to the WDVA's Veterans Outreach and Recovery Program as a Coordinator for an 8-county area, assisting Veterans through struggles he understands and connecting them with needed support services. Along the way of helping others Mark gained a sense of life appreciation and learned to recognize his own resiliency and mental health needs. With ongoing counseling and the support of the many Veteran's organizations in which he's a member, Mark learned to pull himself up and thrive in the face of adversity. He also identified the need for something more personally soothing to aid his transition and, having come from a Harley-riding family, he knew it was time he got on a Bike.

Having finally secured a job, Mark took the class in 2016 and immediately found the peace and freedom he was looking for. Despite a tight family budget, they scraped together enough to buy a 2002 883 Huggler and riding quickly became his lifeline. An American Legion Post 243 member, he joined the District 2 Riders and rides most days through his 8-county area supporting our Veteran's needs. He rides in the season's periphery months for the liberating, mind-clearing peace it gives him, and the chance to prolong his ride time. Hogs For Heroes felt this avid rider needed a more dependable Bike to support his continued service to our Veterans and to help manage the personal demons clawing at his life every single day.

In an interesting twist, while surprising Mark with our Board's decision, we learned his Veteran wife obtained her endorsement in July and had been riding his Huggler. He'd assumed since we gifted our third bike for 2019, he had not been selected. Wanting to support his wife's new passion, and desperate to continue riding himself, he gave her his beloved Huggler and they took out a loan to buy a friend's older bike at a reduced price. Shocked by our news just a few weeks after his purchase, Mark sprung into action and sold that bike in 4 days to another Veteran needing to return to the road. They immediately paid off the loan they struggled to take on and focused on finding his dream bike. And the cherry on top...Amber keeps that Huggler and cultivates her enthusiasm for riding.

Mark chose to go to West Bend Harley-Davidson dealership, a family tradition based on exceptional service and we quickly learned why. WOW— what an enthusiastic embrace we received as well as expert attention to Mark's needs. He knew he wanted a preowned bike to save money, his heart was set on blue, and his mind was set on an Ultra. WBHD listened, worked their magic, and brought Mark's dream home: a 2016 Ultra Limited Low, with just 4,000 miles on her and in Superior Blue—his favorite color and a perfect fit. Not only did their incredible generosity leave some spending money in the tank for the next Bike and Veteran pairing, the WBHD team invited us to gift the Bike at their dealership during the 2019 Milwaukee HOG Rally!

Please join us on Saturday, August 31 for our Presentation of Keys Ceremony at 11:00 am at West Bend H-D. We will have a Color Guard Presentation from the West Bend American Legion Post 36 setting a patriotic tone for the event during which we change one more life and honor the gratitude we have for all of our Veterans. We will be gifting this Bike during Day #3 of the Milwaukee HOG Rally— so come hang for the day, enjoy live music, food and beverages and explore all the #MilwaukeeRally has to offer.

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