



## **Introducing Our Next Veteran Recipient: Lucky #13, Sergeant Blake Buchanan of Kenosha, Wisconsin**

A life-long Kenosha resident, Blake Buchanan joined the Army Reserves in 2002 on delayed entry after graduation, looking for a way to pay for college. It immediately turned into something more meaningful for him. On the day he graduated boot camp, the U.S declared war by dropping bombs on Iraq, effectively setting his course. Over the next 10 years, he found himself deployed for almost half of those: Iraq in 2004, Afghanistan in 2010 and stateside in 2013.

In 2005 while in Iraq, Blake, an Army Engineer specializing in Carpentry and Masonry, was building a carport on Ramadi's growing base when a mortar struck the work site. The explosion forced a 13' x 30' framed wall over and directly onto Blake, striking his back and lower extremities. After two weeks of bedrest he went back out with lingering spinal and musculoskeletal injuries that would never effectively heal. Months later an incoming mortar struck a tree outside his building: it's shock wave threw Blake back into the building— effectively protecting him from the shrapnel, yet leaving him with a Traumatic Brain Injury. And again, he went on to further serve and fulfill his duties. Four years later, he deployed to Kandahar Province, Afghanistan, where additional years of convoys, patrols and security assignments on the frontline further contributed to the enemy growing within him: PTSD. Too many damaging incidents, horrifying memories, and years of violence and uncertainty collectively took their toll on his physical and mental health, and eventually pushed him to separate in 2014. He left knowing he had struggles; but had no idea they would eventually leave him 100% disabled with the V.A. and create an unimaginable hole for him to climb out of.

While he had found his "fit" in service, Blake struggled returning home between deployments and after separation. He tamped down emotions and escalating behaviors he didn't understand and turned to alcohol to forget. Nightmares, sleeplessness and anger compromised his character. Depression set in and ramped up with time and setbacks. Efforts to seek help proved frustrating. His body hurt everywhere; he lost jobs because he was unable to physically do the work, and then drank to numb his pain. His drinking spiraled out of control, landing him in trouble with the law, finances and family relationships. He lost himself, his home, truck, savings and hardest of all, he lost his prized, custom Harley Night Train. At his rock-bottom point in 2015...with nothing to his name, ashamed and sitting in a jail cell for another OWI, he realized his need to rebuild his life and pledged to become a better man.

Blake's been sober ever since and literally pulled himself out of his dark hole to become something more. He accessed resources to diagnose and manage his PTSD and continues to work toward improving his life with the help of counselors, family and friends. He obtained a college education and graduated in 2019 with a degree in Social Work. He also started his own business, Buchanan's Rustic Revival, where he uses his welding and carpentry skills to create memorial art and furniture pieces from repurposed materials. Blake dreams of partnering his social work degree with his craft to assist other struggling Veterans through conversational support and art therapy. He's a genuine, humble and self-aware man with a strong compassionate streak. He's volunteered many hours helping others in the Veteran and church communities, and by serving as a Caretaker for his best friend who is wheelchair bound. He credits his faith and God's "back-handed blessings" for the lessons learned and all he's achieved. And although he is beyond grateful to have his life where it is today, he longs to fill the hole in his heart that selling his Harley created seven years ago. He'd been riding since he was 8 years old and the personal peace he found on his Harley compares to nothing he's found since. Hogs For Heroes felt it was time this man regain his passion and accelerate his healing journey back on The Road.

We surprised Blake at a family gathering where he was meeting his one week old Goddaughter for the first time. As we walked in and handed a baby gift to Mom, Blake was wide-eyed with excitement, poking his friend (the Dad who both nominated him and organized the gathering) about who we were and giddy that his friend's wife knew "the Hogs For Heroes people". When she held up the newborn onesie with a Hogs For Heroes patch on it we turned to Blake, introduced ourselves, and told him he was the one we were really there to welcome... back to the road, that is.

He had no clue, and after reading the stories of the other recipients, thought he had no chance in measuring up. We told him otherwise, and then tears of joy came all around.

We took Blake shopping the very next day to find his dream ride at Uke's Harley-Davidson in Kenosha, Wisconsin. He had spent all night looking at bikes, checking inventories and thinking about what he wanted...and ape hangers were his primary wish. Within 10 minutes on the floor, he landed on a sweet, preowned 2017 Vivid Black Road Glide with only 7,500 miles on her. Uke's team was super awesome and generous in helping us make his wish come true...and his beauty will roll off the lot with black 16 inch apes to boot. Blake is an artist who's always made his bikes his own and can't wait to add touches of his favorite color and a nod to being "lucky 13".

Our amazing friends at WI American Legion Riders District 1 jumped right into action and offered to host Blake's Gifting Event on Saturday, June 13, 2020 from 11:00 a.m to 1:30 pm at The Bixby-Hansen Post 171 in Union Grove, WI. The **Presentation of Keys Ceremony will begin at 11:30 a.m.** with the Legion Riders providing a Color Guard to start us off. The Legion will be offering a donation BBQ lunch following the ceremony, with proceeds headed to Hogs For Heroes. Come hang out with friends old and new and help welcome another Veteran rider back to the healing road!