



Introducing Recipient #22: Army Veteran Aaron Kream of Sheboygan, WI

THE QUOTE:

“What I went through in Afghanistan genuinely still haunts me. There is a large sense of pride in what I have done for our Country, for the things that I went through, and for the lives of the people I protected. I would have easily gone 20+ years in the Army had it not been for the injuries I sustained there. I wish I could go back to experience it all again. Yet, even with knowing that, there are parts of Afghanistan that come back to me relentlessly and those are the parts that fundamentally changed who I am. It has been a struggle, one that is still ongoing, to figure myself out. The contradictions of how I feel is something I can’t easily talk about because you can’t really understand it unless you’ve been through it. I am currently being seen by VA psychiatrists, psychologists, and a poly-trauma team for brain damage. This pride and trauma is something that only other Combat Veterans can understand, which is why my time with the CVMA (Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association) was so fantastic. It was a group of Veterans who not only understood me, but also enjoyed that sliver of peace when it’s just the road in front of you. Riding changed my life. Since giving it up for financial reasons, it’s been more difficult to navigate life.”

--- a portion of Aaron Kream’s application

THE DECISION:

It’s time to get this man reconnected and back on the road in front of him.

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Aaron Kream grew up a Wisconsinite, living in West Allis, Oconomowoc and finally Sheboygan where he later returned to put down roots with his own family. In the midst of family challenges and his parents marital woes, Aaron grew angry and looked to rebel. School wasn’t his thing; and with freedom, a car, and money he subsequently developed a truancy problem. A court order placed him in a high school for misguided youth; and Aaron quickly learned how difficult life was for others, and could be for him. Crediting his teachers for their efforts to redirect him, Aaron laid out a path that offered him an escape, a future and a challenge. He enlisted in the Army at age 17, a senior in high school, and headed off to boot camp two weeks after graduation.

Aaron wanted Infantry; and after basic training at Fort Benning, GA, he moved to Fort Polk, LA where he became a Rifleman. He immediately found his purpose and thrived in the routines, discipline and focus the Army required. He met his wife, Jeramie-Anne, and together they began building their family. Enamored with military life, Aaron reenlisted and his family, now with two young sons, moved to Fort Stewart, GA, where the Fire Team Leader completed two operational deployments. His first was to Chad, Africa in 2015 where he spent four months patrolling with and training their armed forces in the fight against the brutal Islamist terrorist group, Boko Haram. The following year he went to Germany for 8 months in support of Operation Atlantic Resolve, an international combat training exercise. Upon returning, invigorated and set on a military career, Aaron reenlisted again and their family moved to Ft. Carson, CO where he was assigned to the 4th Infantry Division. The young couple saw the moves as an adventure and enjoyed the new experiences and friends military life offered. They were no sooner settled and awaiting the birth of their third child when Aaron learned he would soon be deployed to Afghanistan.

He shipped out in April, 2018 to Afghanistan's Logar Province five months after his daughter was born. Now a Sergeant and Infantry Squad Leader, Aaron quickly found himself in the midst of the fight. On frequent patrol through residential areas, he encountered innumerable small-arms battles, regular IED threats, detonations and suicide bombers. On training exercises with the Afghanistan military, he advised on finding and managing land mines. On missions with Special Forces, he participated in raids, captures and kills. And on high-risk convoys, he left base every day believing they would be hit by an IED: it was just a matter of when, how big, and who. Aaron spent 8 months in combat and witnessed "every gruesome scenario that war brings", dealt with death on both sides of the line, and suffered the heartbreaking loss of four good friends. And if the violent losses in war hadn't been enough to scar his heart, he had to grieve the suicide of his brother-in-law from a far, a fellow soldier on another base stateside, and manage both the anger and guilt in being denied leave to support his grieving wife. Yet, Aaron persevered and fulfilled his duties. But every day he was there, he began to detach more from home and stay focused in the moment. Every day he learned to disassociate himself with the dangers he faced and avoid the questions that challenged his moral compass. Every day he felt fear and anger, but put forth a brave and determined front and joked with friends to downplay the fragile reality of their lives. As if all of this weren't enough to mess with his young mind, the multiple and cumulative concussive exposures were unknowingly taking a traumatic toll on his brain. In the midst of what he'd trained for and thrived in, and amongst the brotherhood he desperately loved, Aaron agreed to a third reenlistment and promotion to Staff Sergeant. At the time he signed, he had no idea what those 8 months in war would do to him, nor could he imagine how fundamentally changed he would be as a direct result. He thought only about providing for his family--blood and military-- and advancing his military career.

It wasn't until he was back stateside in January 2019 and moving again to Fort Irwin, California, that the ramifications of war slowly began to tear apart Aaron's mind, heart and soul. Although physically present, his thoughts frequently placed him back in Afghanistan. He was thankful to be alive and happy to be home with family, yet he grieved all he missed and lost in war and anguished over being the one to come home. And while strong in his convictions and duty, he began questioning himself, and character, for all that he did. He found himself racked with flashbacks, sleeplessness dotted with nightmares and an anger he couldn't identify. In training others on base, he was overly aggressive and hard on the soldiers he prepared for combat. He experienced black outs and debilitating headaches for no apparent reason. At home, a once jovial and open place, he was quick to anger, tense and withdrawn. His wife saw him as "a shell of the man he once was" and their family learned to "walk on eggshells" around him. Aaron grew more depressed, his self-esteem crumbled under the weight of his guilt and he wrestled with self-punishment and suicide ideation. Almost a year after returning, Aaron was on a night training mission when his mind violently placed him back in Afghanistan and he perceived his inexperienced crew to be in danger. They weren't...but it was this, his moment of realization, that signaled something was wrong with him. Despite the mental health stigma and risk of losing his status on base, and in the Army itself, Aaron made the courageous decision to seek help after more than a year of avoiding his issues. He credits his Platoon Sergeant as his life's most influential person for understanding his struggle, getting him into treatment, and paving the way for his medical retirement. In September 2020, Aaron was sent to the Strong Hope Military Program in Utah for a 30 day intensive, inpatient PTSD treatment that helped him break himself down and begin the long, hard process of healing. It was there, in group therapy with older Veterans, that he learned the value in sharing his story at an early stage and vowed not to hold in his struggles and fears.

At just 26 years old, with 8 ½ years of service, Aaron's dreams of retiring from the Army were gone, along with his identity and way of life. He was medically discharged in April 2021 with PTSD and Traumatic Brain Injury. And while none of what he's experienced since returning has gone away or been cured, he's learned much about how to manage his struggles and push through these dark times. To his credit, he avoids alcohol and is committed to his therapy, medications and counseling sessions...and to moving his family

forward. Aaron has the great love, support and understanding of his wife and family; and, together they have envisioned a plan for their growth. The Kreams chose to return to Sheboygan to establish roots close to his family and their three children have quickly acclimated to new friends and activities. Aaron, who's always loved working with his hands and is passionate about cars, found a mechanic position and will be starting a two year automotive technology program this month. Jeramie-Anne begins an evening Masters program in Mental Health Counseling this September. And now that they have settled, they're saving to buy their first home and prioritize their children's needs over everything else. But for as much as Aaron is determined to move forward, there's a component of his heart that has been missing for almost two years: a motorcycle— and their plan has no room for purchasing one.

Aaron grew up riding dirt bikes and scooters and bought his first motorcycle, a Sportster, after landing in Louisiana at 18. He's had several motorcycles since, and one on every base, simply to escape and clear his mind. He loved riding, period. After moving to his last base in California, he bought a used Street Glide and joined a CVMA Chapter— and that's when he made the connection between riding and it's supportive brotherhood. With discharge looming, and knowing life would be financially difficult upon retiring, he put his family's needs first and sold his bike to prepare for their next move. And as he shared, "it's been more difficult to navigate life" since doing so. Hogs For Heroes admired the strength and honesty in which Aaron has faced his demons; and, recognizing the rough road still ahead of him, we thought we'd make it a little smoother with the return of wind therapy.

We crashed a rare date night out for the young couple and took them by surprise. Aaron could hardly believe our good news as he had already prepared himself to apply again next year. Given his Sheboygan location, he had multiple dealerships within a short drive and we sent him out to test ride and find his perfect fit. After riding and searching, Aaron found "The One" on the showroom floor of Harbor Town Harley-Davidson in Manitowoc. This 2017 H-D Ultra Limited is gorgeous in Denim Black/Grey, loaded with upgrades, and barely broken in with only 8,600 miles on her. And boy was the HTHD team awesome— not only did they knock a huge chunk off that price tag for us... they threw in the detachable back rest for his wife and let us leave some money in the tank for the next Bike and Veteran pairing! As we began planning his gifting ceremony, we realized the Hometown Rally would offer an amazing crowd to support Aaron's return to the road... and when we asked our friends at West Bend Harley-Davidson to help, we barely had the words out before they welcomed us in! We think it's absolutely awesome that we had two H-D dealerships work together to honor this Veteran and celebrate his return to riding.

We are gifting this bike on **Saturday, September 4, 2021 at West Bend Harley-Davidson** as part of the Harley-Davidson Hometown Rally festivities. **We will be hanging out from 11:00 am to 6:00 pm** to help others learn of our mission and will "take the stage" for our **Presentation of Keys Ceremony at 1:00 pm**. Our goal in starting this nonprofit was to gift one Harley a year and subsequently change one life a year. This bike is our 22nd in our five year history of gifting Harleys, our sixth of this riding season and our last of 2021. Please ride on over— two wheels or four, rain or shine— to help us honor all of our Veterans by welcoming this one back to the healing road.