



**Meet our Next Recipient, #24:  
Marine Gerald Sieren of Beloit, Wisconsin**

This is a story of perseverance: a trait every single Marine knows and values deeply...despite the obstacles placed in one's way.

Jerry Sieren was raised in Janesville, Wisconsin. His family life was one of hardship and heartache: a broken home with several step-fathers and years of financial struggles. He was lucky enough to be exposed to horses and, after learning to ride at age 5, he spent much of his childhood riding and caring for them in exchange for labor and a life-long love. Jerry also grew up longing for attention from a father who made little time for him. And, in his youthful, misguided thinking...Jerry made every effort to capture that attention in all the wrong ways. By the age of 13, he had an expensive rap sheet of problematic behaviors and activity. Both the police and social work departments knew Jerry well; and when his mother didn't know what to do any longer, they placed him in a foster home for a year. Later, a freshman in high school, he sat in juvenile detention for 60 days, waiting for his father who never came. The rejection hurt then, as much as it still does today, but it was that moment of recognition when Jerry decided he wanted a different life. He changed his course direction almost overnight; and, he learned to ride dirt bikes as a way to release his energy. School was hard but he made his grades, kept himself out of trouble and graduated. He bought his first motorcycle during this time and cultivated what would become a lifelong passion and healing freedom. Unsure of his future and considering the military, Jerry took a bet with a friend that he couldn't get into the Marine Corps. He learned the hard way that stupid actions of yesterday would be detrimental to his Marine dreams, and he spent the next two years rebuilding his name and finally persuading the Marine Corps to accept his candidacy.

In January, 1987, at the age of 20, Jerry left for boot camp in San Diego. He had never been so excited and committed to anything before. He vowed himself to excellence and set his sights on a lifetime of service. He loved everything about the Corps right from the start: the structure, the discipline, the lifestyle: it invigorated him and gave him the sense of family he had long desired. Near the end of boot camp, Jerry developed bilateral stress fractures to his shin bones. He had pushed hard to shine through those three months and, fearing failure, he pushed even harder through the pain to complete his training. He headed off to Camp Lejeune to specialize in Combat

Engineering and in the midst of training his stress fractures flared and began affecting his knees. Again, he successfully pushed through the pain and departed for Kaneohe Marine Corps Air Station in Hawaii. A few months in, Jerry finally sought medical attention and was placed on light duty at base headquarters. It wasn't the role he'd hoped to have, but as their new Chief Mail Clerk, Jerry vowed to do the best he could while his legs and knees healed. And he did just that: earning a Meritorious Mast for his excellence in personal performance and operations after a department inspection. He surprisingly found his work enjoyable and, loving the camaraderie, looked forward to supporting base operations. In mid-1988 a new Second Lieutenant arrived with an intent to fix all he thought was wrong with his Marines and his new base. For most of the next year, Jerry would be called into his Executive Officer's private office and verbally abused, degraded and physically assaulted.

Jerry became the direct target for all that was wrong with this man's life and character, both military and personal. A larger man, Jerry was embarrassed by the actions of his smaller-sized XO and didn't talk about the abuse with colleagues. It was 1989 and the military was a different culture: efforts to seek intervention only backfired and resulted in further retaliatory aggression. Fearful, intimidated and unsupported, Jerry took the abuse from his chain of command until the day his XO purposefully took a baton to his hand and fractured two bones. In the investigative aftermath, Jerry was the one deemed expendable and was honorably discharged with a physical disability after 2 years of service. Without control or options, his military dreams came to a crashing halt and it took him 25 years to realize he was not the military failure his untimely discharge made him believe.

His physical injuries would go on to impact his legs and knees for the rest of his life, as would the invisible wounds inflicted. His mind reeling with what just happened, he bought another motorcycle to help find peace and support. The experience tore Jerry down and left him devastated and angry. It stripped him further of his self worth, esteem and confidence and set him on a rollercoaster life path filled with severe depression and regrettable choices as he worked to redefine himself again. He moved from job to job and place to place desperate to fit in and find approval. He would find love... then struggled through three different divorces that gave him four amazing children, but left him with child support bills he is still docked for today. Along the way he earned three degrees to help him find that elusive professional path he desired. Jerry built good times, too, and eventually amassed a successful business with material gains, only to lose it all in the crash of 2008. He moved to his mother's home a broken man and, once again, worked to rebuild an independent life.

Through this all he had his horses: both iron and four-legged that buoyed him and gave him deep, therapeutic comfort. He would ride his motorcycles to clear his mind

and bond with friends, and spend hours with his rescue horses to soothe his soul and share his emotions. Despite this support, his despair and desolation further ebbed and flowed and left him contemplating suicide more times than he cares to recall. Surprised himself, Jerry has managed to successfully push through his pain, his determination strengthened by his love of life and family. But the cycle of more jobs, more places and more failure continued; and he found himself hungry and homeless more times than he can remember. He always made sure his horses were cared for first, often trading labor for boarding. And it was through a boarding experience that he had the chance to work with another struggling Veteran and found an inner strength and blossoming passion for helping others.

In 2015, Jerry landed a job he wholeheartedly believes to be his ultimate life-calling: he became a Veterans Outreach and Recovery Coordinator. In this position he would search for and assist struggling Veterans on the streets in the La Crosse region and work to connect them with resources and support. Drawing from his own life experiences and ability to relate, he put his heart into helping save and redirect others. He was genuine and determined, and he easily connected with others by sharing his own truths. He personally invested himself in their lives and inspired many to seek the help and support they were deserving of. It was the first time in the 25 years since he was discharged that he truly realized that he did, in fact, have military success and finally found pride in his service.

His new work was tough; and although personally fulfilling, its many burdens weighed on his still depressed and struggling self. In 2016, Jerry put a gun to his head and was stopped only by his service dog's efforts. Because he knew the resources he easily referred others to, Jerry finally sought help for himself and eventually received a disability rating for PTSD. With resources and personal support, he continued his Veterans outreach work for six years until just recently taking a position within Rock County as an Assistant County Veterans Service Officer advocating for Veterans rights and claims.

Serving our Country and struggling Veterans in this very different and important way was the call to service Jerry never imagined all those years ago. And while it fills his heart with purpose and keeps his mind focused on helping others, learning to move through ongoing feelings of betrayal and failure continues to take every ounce of concerted effort. Our Advisory Board couldn't help but be impressed with the courage and tenacity in which Jerry has fought his way through his own personal hardships, and those of his fellow Veterans. And it was time someone fought for Jerry.

Jerry last had a motorcycle in 2019 when he sold it to finally buy a home for his new family and used a portion of its sale to purchase a boat for family time. While the

intention was good... the boating experience was disastrous and the loss of riding affected Jerry more than he imagined. While he and his wife, Holly, work hard to make ends meet, there is no room in their tight budget to buy a bike to fill his heart again. Hogs For Heroes felt that regaining the peaceful healing that riding has provided Jerry for over 40 years would help him keep fighting for himself.

We met Jerry in a covert operation set up by his wife and watched his face quickly turn from wary, to surprise, to joy and relief as he processed our news. He is selective about who he shares his life story with and does so only in situations where he knows its impact will help another. There is nothing easy about sharing his truths, but he does so knowing that he could be the one to enhance another's sense of worth, support another's pain-filled struggles or, better yet, save another's life.

We took Jerry shopping the very next day at Harley-Davidson of Madison in Madison, WI. He'd spent his entire night before sleeplessly dreaming about the perfect bike, and he found it on his local dealership's floor: a beautiful 2018 H-D Ultra Limited in two-tone gray with killer pipes and elevated bars to perfectly fit his shoulders. Our friends at Madison really showed us the love by taking that price down below our budget to leave a little fuel in our tank for the next Bike and Veteran pairing. And then, when we asked if we could hold our double ceremony at their dealership, they opened their arms even wider for us.

We are rolling into 2022's record-breaking gifting season with a "2 Up" biker approach and presenting keys to our 23rd and 24th Veteran Recipients at the same time! Join us on Saturday, May 7, 2022, from 11 am - 1:00 pm at Harley-Davidson of Madison as we honor the gratitude we have for all Veterans by supporting the healing needs for two injured Marines at once. Our Presentation of Keys Ceremony will start promptly at 12:00. Come on out and help us welcome two more injured Wisconsin Veteran riders back to the healing road!