



**Meet #30:
Army National Guard Veteran, Nicholas Brewer
Of Oshkosh, WI**

Nick Brewer grew up an only child on the east side of Madison, Wisconsin. He was “not a good child”: his mischievous nature repeatedly drew him to trouble, and his large size first primed his knack for fighting on the playground when picked on him. He took significant liberties with the freedom his parents gave him; and in his teen years, a string of bad choices left him, more often than not, in police hands. He was sent to spend summers on his grandfather’s farm and, hating school as he did, Nick did little to enhance his opportunities during the school year. Facing graduation with poor grades, a dead-end job and on the wrong side of justice...his outlook was bleak. Realizing he would likely face prison or die if he continued his destructive path, Nick decided to join the Army National Guard with his best friend and left for boot camp in 2005.

His choice proved an unexpected win. Nick quickly acclimated to the structure, thrived in the discipline and found a family in his platoon. He was enthralled with service and knew he wanted more; but while considering a change to active duty and infantry options, his fiancé threatened to leave him if he chose either. Nick acquiesced, stayed the course and became a Petroleum Supply Specialist with the Guard. With that training he found pride and an enhanced work ethic; and equally important, he learned to become a better person. He looked forward to his monthly drill weekends and hoped for his chance to deploy. In fact, he applied four different times to deploy individually and support other units, and was turned down each time. Life grew harder for Nick: he worked three different civilian jobs, juggled his military requirements, married and shortly thereafter, divorced; and, despite his best efforts, he found himself unemployed, in debt and homeless. Perfectly timed with this low point, in 2009 Nick received full time orders to serve stateside with the Department of Health and Human Services for the H1N1 outbreak. Not only did the pandemic give him a designated military purpose, it gave him the chance to build his relationship with his current wife, Kim.

In 2010, Nick’s Unit was called to deploy to Iraq for a year and he was elated for the chance to serve overseas. He left for Fort Hood, Texas, to prepare for two months before arriving in Kuwait to acclimatize to the summer’s 130 degree temperatures and sandstorms. He then transferred to Talill Air Base in Nasiriyah to work their Forward Area Refueling Point for the next year. The day he arrived on base was the same day President Obama declared Iraq a “peace zone”. And on that very same day, Nick’s base was mortared in defiance and claimed the lives of three soldiers. The attacks and explosions that welcomed him would continue to become a routine part of his next year in southern Iraq, despite the “peace” declared.

Nick was quickly promoted and as a young Sergeant was given a team of difficult soldiers to train, redirect and staff their daily 12 hour shifts for helicopter refueling. Although their busy base housed Blackhawks and Apaches, different helicopters from surrounding areas specifically flew in for the fuel they provided. Procedures in this high traffic, highly flammable arena left little room for error or delay and the responsibility weighed on Nick. As a secondary assignment, Nick was required to search their airfield for unexploded ordnance after each of the frequent mortar attacks— often in the dark, in an empty refueler truck, and without identifying equipment. The combination of staff, duties and the inherent stress repeatedly tested his patience, left him continuously on guard and frayed his nerves. With experience, Nick grew emboldened and invincible; and to do his job with the obstacles faced, he pushed away the emotions, threats and dangers to the deep recesses of his mind where they patiently waited for their chance to surface.

As his time progressed, Nick found himself training new refueling crews on different bases in southern Iraq. He moved about this still volatile country catching rides on the helicopters he refueled—aircraft that were frequent targets for the insurgents below. While he laughs about his nervous response in spotting his first impending RPG mid-air, it is the second half of the story he doesn't talk about as he saw exactly where it landed in a small Iraqi town. Moving about the country opened his eyes to the war's bigger picture; and Nick quickly learned the fight was far from over, locals and children could not be trusted, and that not all bases were well guarded. Mortar attacks still randomly pounded the various bases he visited. After arriving on one particular forward-operating base, he found himself offering to help and engaged in firefight as the base came under attack. His travel experiences left him exhausted, mistrustful, and growing numb to the violence and proximity of danger he found himself in.

While attending a combatives class midway through his year in Iraq, Nick's instructor decided to show him how flexible he could be; and, as Nick puts it, "it was the first, last and only time I ever kissed the inside of my thigh". Nick, who at 6'4" and then 240 lbs., was literally folded in half as an example and the searing low back pain was immediate. He hobbled away with help, but was unable to walk the next day with pain radiating down his legs. The field hospital provided him with muscle relaxants, narcotics and three days of bedrest. Although placed on light duty, his role and station required physicality and presence, and Nick further learned how to work through pain, physical and psychological, to continue doing the "unfortunate things" war required of him.

His deployment complete, Nick returned the summer of 2011 with significant back pain and the early signs of emotional turmoil cracking his tough persona. With his contract ending, and unable to reenlist with his back injury, Nick separated from the Army National Guard in February, 2012. Transition was harder than imagined: his new reality juxtaposed with his year in combat left him bewildered and angry, and he struggled to relate, communicate and trust. Although reunited with his fiancée and soon to marry, anger and depression grew quickly as he questioned his actions, purpose and future...and he chose to bottle up his spiraling emotions rather than talk about them. He knew he needed a release and decided to take a motorcycle riding class. On the 30 year-old Honda his brother-in-law gave him, Nick learned first hand the healing power that wind therapy provided and he quickly developed a passion for riding as much as he could.

With his new wife's encouragement, and despite his dislike of school, they moved to Oshkosh and Nick entered UW-Oshkosh to pursue a Bachelor's degree in Urban & Community Planning. The transition from military, to civilian, to student was a whirlwind of emotion and struggle; and the one thing that helped settle his anxious mind was his bike. He found work at the Veterans Resource Center on campus and learned he enjoyed helping Veterans, but between his back pain and depression it was all he could do some days to survive. He rode as much as he could to temper his struggles, but shortly after the arrival of their first child, Nick's beloved bike broke down. Unable to repair it or buy a replacement, he was left without his stress reliever. He pushed forward, did his best to hide his pain and eventually graduated...but he knew he was fighting a losing battle with his mental health. It wasn't until his wife finally told him he was "different" since returning that he fully considered the invisible damage war had inflicted. He agreed with her and, even better, in 2015 he decided to finally get help and committed to counseling.

With another child on the way, Nick worked odd jobs for any money he could; and unable to find a job in his new field, he instead pursued a Masters in Public Administration. Buying another motorcycle was a long way out, so he built upon the release he found in helping Veterans. He volunteered with the Oshkosh VFW, eventually became their Commander, and helped them restructure and build their finances. Three years later, with his Masters program complete, Nick took a job with the Office of Veteran Employment Services. He'd been there four years until this January when he became a Veterans Outreach Coordinator for his seven-county territory, and now uses both his expertise and personal experience to help struggling, at-risk Veterans find the resources they need.

Nick's two herniated discs were finally surgically repaired nearly 10 years after the incident; and although he now spends most of his days pain free, his PTSD still burdens his mind and heart. Years of counseling have allowed him to channel his inner turmoil into an energy he uses to push forward for his family's sake and those he serves. Nick and Kim have come a long way on this journey together: she was there before he left, and she's been there to guide his way back. Together they have three young children and two dogs that fill their busy house and schedule; and we fully saw the love and pride Nick has for his sweet family when we crashed his 5 year-old son's birthday dinner to share our exciting news. Their middle daughter has significant special needs, and their fierce dedication has helped her come much farther than doctors ever predicted. A recent student herself, Kim just graduated with a degree in Special Education, and with all three children now in elementary school this fall, she will take her first teaching position with a young, autistic classroom. Together the family enjoys time in the north woods, playing games and goofing around; but their ability to find time and money to devote to their adult selves is hard.

Outside of riding, Nick enjoys hunting and fishing, blacksmithing and tending to their family garden. After six long years without a bike, a steady income finally allowed Nick to buy another two years ago: a 1999 Kawasaki with over 86,000 miles. It was the bike he could afford for the wind therapy he desperately missed, and needed; and unfortunately, they can't afford its continual repairs and modifications to fit his large stature. And without a reliable, comfortable bike, he can't get the riding his soul needs or the distance his rider's heart craves. Nick has done what others deem daunting: he turned his young life around, went to war and now fights his own ever-present demons. Additionally, he achieved two degrees, and has thus far dedicated his professional career to caring for our Veterans. While our gift is not an award, we can't help but be impressed with his strength and dedication; and we know that, too, is a daunting undertaking. Hogs For Heroes felt that giving Nick a reliable tool to keep wind therapy in his life would help this injured Veteran stay on his long, and hard, healing path; and, we chose him to be our 30th Veteran Recipient.

Nick is about to receive his first Harley-Davidson and he needed a little time to determine what fit was best for him. A few test rides later, and a lot of online looking... he landed on a beautifully loaded 2017 Ultra Limited, with only 8,500 miles, in his favorite "blood red" color. Appleton Harley-Davidson was, as usual, phenomenal to work with and knocked that price down to meet our budget and make this Veteran's dream come true. Unique to this bike, it has been fully paid for by...wait for it...quilters across our nation! Internationally known quilting phenom, and rider, Wisconsinite Lisa Bongean saw her first gifting in 2019 and left in tears, vowing to do something to help raise money. She designed a patriotic quilt and materials with her business Primitive Gatherings in Larsen, WI, and offered the pattern and a 20 week online tutorial to her thousands of followers, free of charge, in the hope that participants would instead donate to her fundraising goal. And did they ever! From coast to coast, people were stitching their hearts out and generously sharing for the chance to provide a Veteran with a Hog. They raised \$43,462—enough to fully cover one bike and give us an incredible jump on another—and it only makes sense that we gift this Harley to Nick at the quilting mecca that made it all possible, and at a place just north of his home.

Join us on **Sunday, August 7 at 11:00 am** as we pass the keys to keep riding in Nick's life and help him stay on his healing path. We will be **hanging at Primitive Gatherings, in Larsen WI, from 10:00 to 1:00 pm** for the chance to meet with you and share our mission. The ladies of Primitive Gatherings will be offering a donation lunch of hot beef sandwiches to raise further funds for us— so make us a destination ride, grab a bite and check out this beautiful place.