



“I would not be here today without riding. I live to ride...but I ride to live.”

**Meet Recipient #41, and the First of 2024:
Army Veteran Brandon Kronberg of Hortonville, Wisconsin**

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Brandon Kronberg was just three years old living in Virginia when his mother was critically injured in a motorcycle accident, losing her ability to care for her son. Brandon lived with his grandparents the next six years, then was sent to Larsen, Wisconsin to live with an aunt and uncle and seven cousins. He was angry and hyperactive, accustomed to being an only child, and far too young to understand the heartache, or lifeline, he'd been dealt. He settled in with his new “parents and siblings”, was home-schooled, and lived under their rules until his late teens when running away from the frequent arguments seemed the best way to deal with his problems. Wanting his high school diploma, Brandon secured entry into Wisconsin's National Guard Challenge Academy where he underwent intense physical training and drill work, lived under military structure and discipline, and received his GED. He thrived in the orderly environment and envisioned a future he couldn't before. Having turned 18, and knowing his parents couldn't stop him, Brandon enlisted in the Army.

He easily moved through boot camp and in 2005, as a Bridge Crew Member Specialist, Brandon was stationed at Fort Benning, Georgia. Just eight months later his unit deployed to Al Quim, Iraq where they were attached to the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force. The years 2006-2007 were tumultuous and dangerous ones in Iraq: and moving convoys of supplies and soldiers across the country was no comfortable feat. Working in part as a gunner, Brandon manned the gun turret while moving throughout Iraq, from base to base, and as Security from project to project. As part of the Bridge Crew, he built a floating bridge across the Euphrates River that would ultimately be given to the Iraqi people. After an enemy-detonated IED created a hole in the bridge of a critical supply route, the close group worked four exhausting days of 24-hour operations to rapidly restore the flow. And in the most harrowing of experiences, under cover of night and amidst snipers, his team was tasked with removing a bridge at the Haditha Dam to halt enemy weapon transport. For 15 nights they toiled with plasma torches to cut the bridge apart. The demanding work took a toll on Brandon's shoulders, back and knees— imparting pain and physical limitations that still affect him daily. As if each project weren't difficult enough, war raged all around them as they worked in extreme environmental conditions, lived under constant explosive attack and carried the painful loss of one of their own.

After 12 long months away, Brandon returned home a changed man, and did his best to deny it. He married his fiance the month after returning. Feeling tense and hypervigilant, he bought his first motorcycle to release the stress, but lost it later in a string of poor financial decisions that would mar his next several years. He tried to find “normal” but instead found a growing anger and short fuse that caused volatile, physical outbursts. His enlistment contract ended in 2008; and wanting to move past the strife that gripped him, the young couple moved to Mississippi to be near her family. Brandon had hoped for a fresh start; instead, his demons traveled with him. He became more unsettled and struggled to find work, purpose and a fit in the unfamiliar town. Brandon desperately missed the close Brotherhood he had in service; and, against the wishes of his wife, joined the Army Reserves less than a year after separating from Active Duty. Although he regained a sense of purpose, his anger didn't change nor did his behavior. He again floated from job to job, frustrated and depressed, and unwilling to admit he needed help. With the birth of their first

son, the joy mixed with financial strain and he struggled with the roles of both husband and father for the next two years...until he deployed to Iraq again, leaving his pregnant wife behind.

In January, 2011 Brandon arrived at COB Adder, Iraq to work as a Heavy Equipment Operator for the next thirteen months. Although we were in the draw-down phase of war, he built up roadways in reparation, in the midst of heavy public traffic, and then finished-graded them to enhance IED detection—jobs that further built anxiety and public mistrust. In the face of withdrawal plans, violence still loomed and his base still took the occasional mortars. As time wound down, he found himself on a Dozer moving dirt to bury U.S. equipment deemed non-transportable at war's end...and the rage he internalized bubbled closer to the top. While the jobs themselves weren't difficult, it was the mental strain he really wrestled with, compounded by his heavier sense of responsibility for the younger soldiers he worked with.

Brandon returned home from his second deployment in February, 2012, at age 25, excited to meet his new, 6-month old daughter and further haunted by the demons left to grow. They moved back to Wisconsin, this time to be near his family; and while the additional support was good, it wasn't enough to settle his mind or behavior. Nightmares began plaguing his sleep, his body hurt everywhere and as his anger hit new levels, he continued to deny the injuries within. Although he found work and they welcomed more children, the marriage began crumbling under the increasing strain of Brandon's struggle and refusal to be "labeled".

He responded by putting up thicker emotional walls, neglecting others and faltering as a husband. Every day he slipped further into a deep, dark hole, searching for a release and understanding he didn't know he needed. He believed himself unworthy of love: and ultimately lost his wife, his sense of self and his desire to live. At one of his lowest points Brandon made the decision he regrets most to this day: he left his family and filed for divorce, believing his absence would be better for them. It took a long, painful year of separation before he realized how much he needed his children in his life. But unable to recognize the love and concern of family, he refused to speak with his parents and siblings for another five years. He painfully stumbled through those years— alone, angry and suicidal— before finally acknowledging that he, and his family, needed help. And in 2018, Brandon finally stepped forward for counseling and began the hard work of rebuilding himself.

In 2019, still in the throes of therapy and job turnover, Brandon was finding new levels of peace and happiness. He was spending time with his children, talking with his family again and focusing on healthy coping strategies. That fall Brandon received the tragic news his estranged mother had been murdered; and still financially insecure, he couldn't afford to go to Virginia for her funeral. The area's Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association (CVMA) Chapter heard of his misfortune and reached out to pay his transportation costs. Stunned by the kindness of strangers, albeit Brothers, Brandon realized his need to be a part of a Veterans group who helped other Veterans. After a ten year hiatus in riding, he saved and bought a 1981 Suzuki, all his \$500 could afford, for the chance to join CVMA 45-3 and ride again. Almost immediately, riding provided the freedom he didn't realize his heart and mind were missing and the supportive camaraderie he'd been desperate to regain. From that point on, Brandon's rode every chance he's gotten, owning seven different bikes the past five years, using his bike to heal personally and improve the lives of others.

Brandon is the proud, single father of five children, his greatest accomplishment, and deeply values the love and bonds he's built with family— blood and military. He now benefits from a good relationship with his ex-wife and partnership in parenting. He found love and acceptance with his new girlfriend, Shannon, and thrives with the unconditional love of his eight-month old support dog, Tilly. Brandon spends his free time with those close to him and loves video gaming, fishing and, of course, riding. Last year he put on over 8,000 miles, despite the physical pain he endured, and captured his first Iron Butt patch. He rides not only because he wants to, but because he needs to; and he shares with certainty that he would not be here today

if it weren't for riding. Unfortunately his body can no longer tolerate the rider position of his current bike and his financial situation can no longer handle the loan payments and repairs it required. He sold his 2018

Triumph Tiger this winter, the one thing that helps him the most, and has since fretted over the deep loss it poses to his mental health. And without a motorcycle, he can no longer be a part of CVMA, a group Brandon also credits with saving his life. Hogs For Heroes heard the pain, passion and need as he unfolded his story in our application. Although Brandon has moved miles these past years, like most with PTSD he still struggles at different times. Our gift is not a cure; but we believed his path forward would benefit from regaining a motorcycle and keeping the many supportive alliances he's built.

Completely surprised by our decision, Brandon wasted no time searching for his very first Harley-Davidson. He knew he wanted a Road Glide and he knew he wanted to work with his hometown dealer, Appleton H-D. Like a kid in the candy store, he went from one beauty to another on the showroom floor, convinced he'd found "the one"... until he found the back room. There, just taken in, was the bike of an employee, an Army Veteran that Brandon had once worked with, and it immediately lit his heart on fire. It was a 2020 Road Glide Special in Billiard Blue with a slew of stunning upgrades, meticulously cared for and with less than 5,000 miles on her. Our friends at Appleton H-D worked their magic to bring this sweet ride in under our budget, generously supporting our efforts to help heal another injured Wisconsin Veteran rider with the gift of wind therapy.

We typically move fast to get our Veteran Recipients back on the road, but we broke records lining this one up as quickly as we did. With a warm welcome from new friends, we will be gifting this bike **during the 42nd Annual Ant Hill Mob Motorcycle Show at the Manitowoc Expo Center on Saturday, April 27, 2024. The Presentation of Keys Ceremony will start promptly at 4:00 pm...**but be sure to come extra early to tour the showroom floor and enjoy the many bikes and vendors in attendance.

Please note there is a \$5 entry fee for the group's charitable effort to support local needs. And while you are there, be sure to buy their annual Fun Run book to enhance your summer riding— Hogs For Heroes is a lucky recipient of their fundraising efforts this year!